

Phase 2 - COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

Week 5. Unit 2.2. PERSONS-IN-CONTEXTS II: Self and Society; Group Norms; Conformity and Deviance; Obedience; and, how do "social media" figure in?

FACILITATION: Study Group #2

ASSIGNMENT OVERVIEW:

READ by yourself then DISCUSS in your study group:

2.2-1 [SA] Chapter 2

2.2-2 "Opinions and Social Pressure"

VIEW by yourself or with other then DISCUSS in your study group:

2.2-3 *The Wave* (video viewing time 47 mins)

READ by yourself or with others then DISCUSS in your study group:

2.2-4 "You will do as directed"

VIEW by yourself or with others then DISCUSS in your study group:

2.2-5 *Part 1: The Challenger Disaster* (video viewing time 7 mins)

HOW DO THE NEW SOCIAL MEDIA RELATE TO ISSUES OF CONFORMITY AND DEVIANCE?

ASSIGNMENT DETAILS: THINK OVER by yourself then DISCUSS in your study group.

2.2 – 1 [SA] Chapter 2

By forming ourselves more or less self-consciously into a pedagogically sound, prosocially oriented time-limited instantiation of the scientific inquiry process, we are both engaging in and able to consider the meaning of "social influence" and "conformity" in this context and identify various modes of creativity and commitment in which beliefs, values, and practices advocated by some individual(s) or group(s) lead numbers of people to conform by engaging either transiently or enduringly in some more or less prosocially constructive and humanecologically sustainable interactions.

We are all members of many different human social groups. A primary social psychological presumption is that our patterns of membership – whether attained by choice, by chance, or by coercion – are powerfully influential in shaping our attitudes and behavior.

Make a list of the systems that you belong to. Name as many as you can in 5 minutes. Start with your family of origin and your memberships in commonly recognized classes or other groups (e.g. socioeconomic and ethnic/linguistic/cultural background, actual and virtual social networks and other categories (e.g. male/female).

Indicate whether and if so to what extent your membership is due to

(a) fate or chance (e.g. "accidents of birth"),

(b) personal inclination; appetite; desire

(c) social pressure; the force of circumstances; unwillingly; by coercion ("social definition")

The power of authority and peer pressure to influence cognition and judgment and behavior is truly impressive. The classic case study was done with male undergraduate students in an academic context in the 1950s – it is Solomon E. Asch's famous and "still hard to believe its true" so-called "line length" experiment.

2.2 – 2 Asch, Solomon E. "Opinions and social pressure." Readings about the social animal (1955): 17-26.

Note that variables that increased and decreased conformity in Asch's experiment were group composition, unanimity, prior commitment, self-esteem, cultural differences, and task difficulty/complexity.

Myriad questions about conformity and obedience to authority arise in everyday real world (e.g. home-life, school-life, work-life) contexts. Can you imagine yourself as a high school student caught up in a popular classroom teacher's effort to simulate life in a totalitarian society?

Think about it. Then watch:

2.2 – 3 *The Wave*. Directed by Alexander Grasshoff. 1981, videorecording.

It is important here to remind you that we're aiming here for something more than mere entertainment.

Enjoy, but please also monitor your own attitudes and take their influence into account: these videos/films should be viewed from your vantage point as a member of this class.

The 1970s "docudrama", *The Wave*, follows the members of a California high school history class as they are drawn by their teacher into an informal "experiment" in social influence.

But that was "back in the day" and there are obvious differences between the students portrayed in the film and yourselves (e.g. in age, context, dress and deportment, background, etc) but please guard against the tendency to allow superficial disparities to serve as a beguiling basis for cognitively "distancing" yourself from them and their predicament.

As a matter of fact, a group of more or less "normal" young people of varying "types" in a California high school classroom in the early 1970's underwent something like the experience depicted in the film.



Photo is in public domain.

- Can you see yourself behaving as any of the students behaved?
- Is the story believable to you?
- Are the characters and contexts recognizably real?
- Which of the adults or students did you find it particularly easy (or hard) to identify or empathize with? Why?
- Does anything in the film remind you of some personal experience?
- How do you deal with things like "peer pressures", "obedience to authority", etc?

2.2-4 Jones, S. "You will do as directed." *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*. Strom, Margot Stern, and William S. Parsons (eds.), 1977.

Two weeks ago, you read Aronson's defense of deception in experimental social psychological research (in SA Chapter 9). Do the methods of the formally experimental Asch and Milgram experiments and/or the less formally scientific "experiment" or exercise done by the classroom teacher in The Wave, bring up any troubling ethical issues for you?

2.2 – 5 “Part 1: The Challenger disaster,” directed by Charles Wiener, videorecording.

Aronson discusses the idea that we can understand the behavior of "uninvolved bystanders" as an instance of conformity (e.g. The Case of Kitty Genovese).



Photo is in public domain.

What is it like for scientists and engineers when they get caught up (as they not uncommonly do) in situations where their personal desires to be faithful in fulfilling scientific, technical, and social responsibilities are directly contradicted and overruled by corporate superiors enunciating the primacy of short term ("bottom-line") organizational interests and objectives of the company? Sometimes lives are literally on the line.



Courtesy of the Online Ethics Center for Engineering and Science, National Academy of Engineering of the National Academies. Used with permission.

As a case in point we ask you to consider, as seriously and protractedly and deeply as you presently can the experience reported by the late Roger Boisjoly. At the time of the disaster, he was a senior engineer employed by the principal launch contractor and, as such, was involved in the last minute debate about whether or not to launch the Challenger space shuttle on that frosty morning. Try to imagine yourself “wearing his hat”: here you are, engaged with others in pursuing your professional career, working in a field in which you are duly credentialed and (presumably) well experienced. That is how you’ve come to find yourself in this altogether “real world” social context in which the decision to launch or not to launch is about to be made. Among the “deciders” – all of whom presumably are comparably expert, informed, capable, and institutionally qualified and accredited engineers, managers, etc. a distinction is made between “engineer hats” and “management hats” For his part, Boisjoly recalls being

much concerned by the possibility of a system failure at liftoff due to the unusually low temperature conditions at the launch site at that time. Today, in the aftermath of the disaster, we know of the likely role of "O" ring failure in causing the fuel tank to leak and explode in the fierce fireball that killed seven astronauts, including one of our own-- MIT graduate, Ronald McNair. At very least, we all owe it to them to be serious students here. What do you imagine it was like to have been there? What would you have done if you'd found yourself in his place? Have you ever been in any even remotely comparable situation?

Further Questions to Consider:

What lessons regarding obedience to authority and conformity to peer pressures do you take away from your exposure to these readings and films?

What roles do rewards and punishments play in producing conformity?

What is deviance?

What is groupthink?

How might one study the effects of the new social media on human social relations?

After completing the foregoing assignments, you should be able to define, differentiate, and use the following terms:

- compliance
- obedience
- identification
- assimilation
- internalization

Compare, contrast, and illustrate by example the characteristics of informationally "open" vs. informationally "semipermeable" vs. informationally "closed" human social systems. Can you apply any of these concepts to situations involving your own membership in a particular group or set of groups?

Class Work:

Responding positively to Social Influence:

conformity, compliance, identification, empathy, internalization

Responding negatively:

deviance, reactance, rejection, negation, denial, disavowal, disaffection, isolation, alienation, frustration, anger, aggression, destructiveness, violence, substance abuse, psychopathology, sociopathy.

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9.70 Social Psychology
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