

SOCIAL INFLUENCE

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Summary

Social influence is the change in individual behavior, opinion, or emotions resulting from what other people do or feel. It can deal with the change of the individual's task performance level in the condition where other people are watching, or when the individual is acting to reach a common goal with other people. The presence of other people (real or imagined) also activates inclinations to conform—the individual tends to behave like other people. The basic motivation responsible for this conformity is connected with informational and normative influences. Authorities have a specific impact on our behavior. Experiments demonstrate that an average individual is capable of causing another person a high degree of pain only because this was commanded by a scientific authority. An analysis of other situations in which we are inclined to fulfill commands, requests, and suggestions of other people has demonstrated that apart from the authority of the person formulating such commands, there are a number of other important mechanisms, namely liking, reciprocation, social validation, consistency, and scarcity.

The vital element of social influence is any other person's activities that shape and modify our attitudes. According to the information-processing model, a change of attitude is conditioned by the subsequent occurrence of the following processes: drawing the recipient's attention to the persuasion communication, the recipient's comprehension of the persuasion contents, acceptance of the argumentation as sensible, and rejection of any following contrary argumentation. However, advocates of the alternative approach to the problem of attitude change underline the fact that attitudes are not always changed in such a rational way. Sometimes quite irrational elements like a large number of persuasive arguments or the speed of speaking are sufficient for the recipient's attitude to change.

1. Introduction

Human beings are social creatures. This implies not only mutual interdependence among individuals but their coexistence within a social group as well. Social life demands people's effective influence on others in order for all to function within a society. On the other hand, other people influence themselves for the very same reason. We often do not realize the fact that our mere presence or a particular gesture or action can affect the reactions or attitudes of other people. Sometimes our influence is fully intentional and we are aware of the interpersonal consequences of our actions. Social influence is a change of the behavior, opinion, attitude, or feelings of individuals resulting from what other people do, think, or feel. According to this definition, an individual's awareness of the change or of the fact that other people's actions were intended is not an indispensable condition for the social influence process to take place. In this article, we will analyze the symptoms of social influence, various mechanisms and techniques of social influence, and the question of attitudes and mechanisms that underlie attitude change.

The basic manifestations of social influence are the influence of the presence of other people on an individual's performance level, conformity, and obedience toward authority. Psychological research indicates that the very presence of other people

influences considerably the speed and the quality of the individual performance of a certain task. Depending on circumstances, this influence may or may not be advantageous. The inclination for conformist behavior is connected with the individual's aspiration to be right (to behave properly, to make the right choices, etc.) or to acquire social acceptance. In both cases, the individual treats the reactions of other people as indications of how to behave. External authorities have a special influence on an individual. The limits of our subordination towards them are, however, much wider than we tend to imagine.

The basic mechanisms of social influence are reciprocation, social validation, consistency, liking the other person, scarcity, and authority. The vast majority of situations in which people agree to comply with requests, suggestions, or recommendations made by other people are in connection with one of these mechanisms or, more often, with a combined influence of several mechanisms. It is these mechanisms underlying the effectiveness of the more or less refined techniques of social influence that are the subject of psychological studies.

Attitudes towards various physical and social objects depend not only on our particular emotions or beliefs about these objects. Attitudes, especially in certain conditions, have great influence on our behavior. No wonder that the mechanisms of attitude change are an area of great interest to social influence researchers. Thanks to theoretical studies and numerous experiments, the conditions of attitude change have been recognized.

2. The Forms of Social Influence

The three most eminent cases of social influence result from the influence of the mere presence of other people on an individual's performance level: conformist inclinations, imitation of other people's behavior, and subordination when confronted with authority.

2.1. Influence of the Presence of Others: Facilitation, Inhibition, and Social Loafing

Numerous psychological studies indicate that the presence of other people to a great degree influences the performance level of an individual. However, this influence turns out to be rather complex. In a situation where other people witness a subject's activity, the subject can function either better or worse. This section explains when improvement of a performance can be expected and when it can be worsened, as well as what mechanisms underlie these dependencies.

2.1.1. Social Facilitation and Inhibition Effects

Toward the close of the nineteenth century, the few psychological laboratories that existed were busy mainly with psychophysiological research. In efficiency and fatigue measurements, sometimes a rather unwelcome phenomenon was observed: the subject's effort changed when other people (e.g. laboratory assistants) entered the laboratory. In more or less the same period, N. Triplett analyzed the tables of the results reached by cyclists. Speed records were much more frequent when several cyclists were racing on parallel tracks rather than when the cyclists had to cover the same distance individually. This discovery inclined Triplett to perform an experiment where the influence of other

people's presence on the speed of subjects' performance of simple motor tasks was analyzed. It turned out that most subjects performed the tasks more quickly when accompanied by another person who performed the same task. The effect of a subject's performance-level increase evoked by the presence of other people has been called social facilitation.

Later experiments, however, did not always confirm this effect. Sometimes it happened that the presence of other people lowered the performance level of the subjects. These inconsistent results were reconciled when R. Zajonc proposed that the presence of other people raises the subject's physiological excitement and motivation for efficient performance. This excitement increases the probability of the occurrence of dominant and consolidated reactions.

The presence of other people should then improve the performance of simple and well-practiced tasks (single dominant reaction) and lower the performance level of complicated, difficult, or new tasks (no single dominant reaction, and the relatively strongest reactions inhibit one another). Most research results confirm the assumption that the facilitation or inhibition effect depends on the degree of performance practice and task difficulty. However, different researchers provide different explanations for the reasons of this dependency. Hence, apart from the Zajonc's explanation, alternative concepts can be found in psychological literature.

The influence of other people's presence does not necessarily depend on their mere observation of the subject's efforts or on whether they are busy with their own tasks at the same time. Other people can cooperate with the subject, thus creating a group performing a common task. This problem is discussed in the next section.

2.1.2. Social Loafing

At the beginning of the twentieth century, M. Ringelmann asked the participants in his experiment to pull a rope in order to achieve its highest possible tension. First the task was performed by individual participants, and then by groups of participants. The measurement of the individual strengths with which each of the participants alone was able to stretch the rope enabled Ringelmann to compare the totals of individual efficiencies with the group efficiency.

It turned out that the group efficiency was always lower than the sum of individual efficiencies. Moreover, the difference widened with the increasing number of participants in the group. Pairs of participants achieved 93% of their theoretically expected strength, groups of three participants reached 85%, and in groups of eight participants the common effort fell to 49% of the theoretical value.

Because similar results were also recorded in other experiments on human group functioning, B. Latane proposed the name social loafing for the phenomenon of lowering individual effort when performing a task as a group (in comparison to the effort a single individual is capable of when performing the task alone). Psychological experiments confirmed the presence of this effect in a great variety of possible

activities, like clapping hands, yelling, finding the right path in a maze, or solving tasks demanding creativity.

One of the main mechanisms responsible for the social loafing effect is the distribution of responsibility. Members of a group feel less responsible for the final result than does an individual working alone. This is reflected in the differences of the subjects' effort levels in individual and group conditions.

The mechanism of group responsibility is able to explain the passivity of a crowd witnessing the tragedy of an individual who is being murdered, raped, or who is struggling to survive in deep water. Research demonstrates that the greater the number of witnesses, the less likely it becomes that someone will try to help. Each individual in a crowd feels minimal responsibility for the fate of the victim. For this reason they remain passive.

2.2. Social Imitation

The tendency to imitate the behavior of other people is one of the most characteristic human inclinations. However, when does this inclination become stronger and what are its symptoms and consequences? These problems are answered in the following section.

2.2.1. Informational and Normative Social Influence

Conformity is unusually common and easy to observe in everyday life. We tend to behave and dress like other people, and even share other people's beliefs. What factors make us so conformist? In psychology, experimental research is the main source of knowledge about conformist mechanisms (as well as of most other psychological phenomena). S. Asch, one of the pioneers of research on conformity, invited a group of people to take part in a laboratory experiment.

Only one of these persons actually was a subject in the experiment, while the others only pretended they had also been invited to take part in the experiment. In fact, they were the experimenter's assistants and they behaved according to instructions they had received. The research was presented as a study on distance perception. The experimenter showed two figures to the participants several times.

There was always a single target line in the first figure, and three lines of different lengths in the other figure. The task for the participants was to indicate which of the three lines was closest in length to the single target line. Participants were to answer sequentially. In some cases the only real participant was asked for an opinion after all other "participants" had already presented their views.

From time to time the pretenders intentionally presented wrong answers. Moreover, their answers were identical. The real participant experienced the dilemma of providing the answer that seemed correct before hearing the other answers, or giving the same answer as the other participants. It turned out that most (76%) of the subjects adopted other participants' opinion in at least one experimental case. Why? Both in psychological experiments and in real social life—why do people sometimes conform?

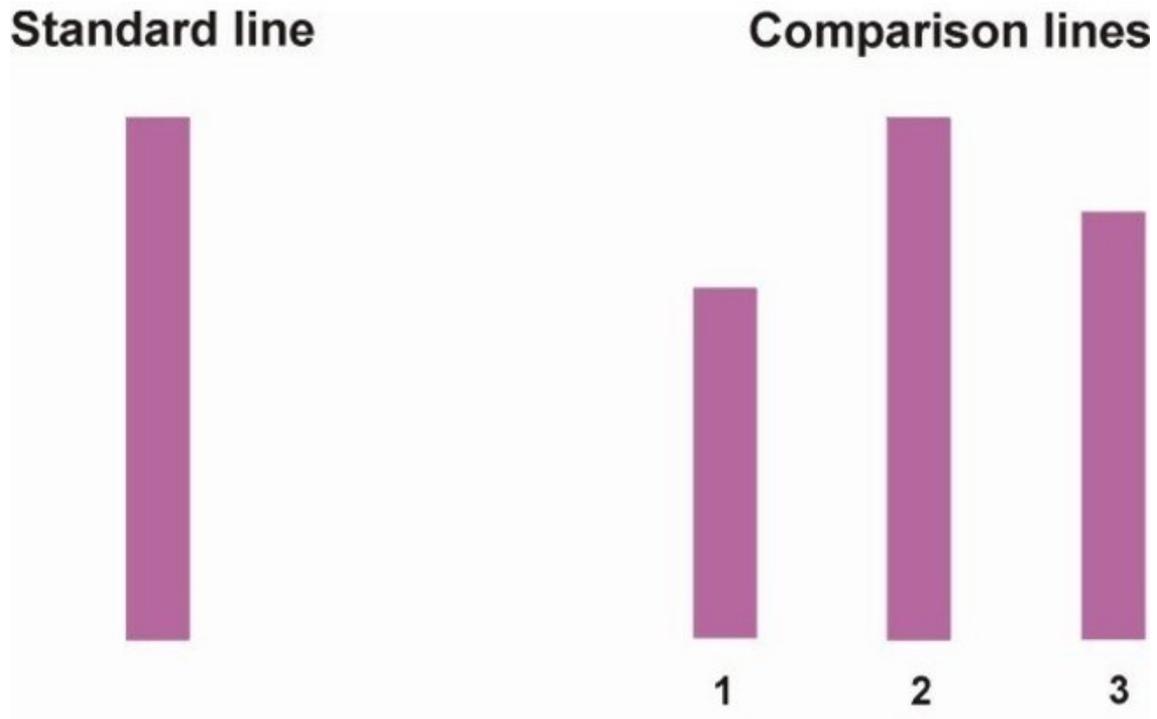


Figure 1. Asch's line judgment task: an example

Deutsch and Gerard have proposed differentiating between two kinds of social influence connected with adopting other people's opinions and imitating their behavior. The first kind is informational. An individual observing the behavior of other people or listening to their opinions treats them as a source of information about reality. An individual who reacts like other people is striving to be right. (When other people do the right things, or have the right opinions, then by imitating them we ourselves can behave correctly and express the right opinions.)

The other kind of social influence is of a normative character. This occurs when the individual who imitates the actions of other people does so in order to become similar to the members of a group. Such behavior becomes a means of maintaining (or achieving) a link with the given group as well as the acceptance of other people. Hence, while the informational influence can be described as the influence driven by the need to be right, normative influence can be described as oriented toward acquiring friends.

Both circumstantial factors and individual personality have an impact on the strength of informational and normative influences. With reference to the experiment by Asch, presented above, the informational influence would occur mainly in equivocal reality (i.e. there would be minimal differences in the lengths of the lines to be compared), and the subject would be convinced about the high level of credibility of other participants (e.g. the subject would know they have very good sight and are highly motivated to provide the right answers), and at the same time would be persuaded about their own minimal competence in the task matter (e.g. the subject's sight and space orientation would be poor). Normative influence would occur in the situation where the subject would be highly interested in gaining the acceptance of the group. The personality factor involved here is the need for social approval.

2.2.2. Conscious and Unconscious Imitation

Imitation can be both fully conscious and totally unconscious. Research demonstrates that during the interaction with a person met for the first time, we tend to make gestures and behave like that person (e.g. stroking the face with a hand, scratching the skin, or swinging a leg). We are completely unaware of doing these things. Similarly, we can be unaware of the fact that the way we dress or behave is a copy of the way some other person dresses or behaves. People who listened to a text on philosophy read by another person in a sad or in a joyful manner, found themselves feeling sadder or more joyful. The unconscious character of imitation is manifested also in the similarity of the pantomimic and facial expressions of children and their parents.

However, there is a great deal of conscious and intended imitation. We can imitate someone we are impressed by, in order to become a similar person ourselves. Children and young people often try to imitate both real persons (like rock musicians and sports figures) and fictional heroes (film and literature). Manipulators can demonstrate similarities between themselves and other people (e.g. similar political attitudes, accepted values, or fondness for a particular kind of music), in order to make themselves well liked by others and to use this bonding for some future purpose [see also section 3.4.]

2.2.3. Social Consequences of Imitation

Imitation can be both a positive and a negative phenomenon. Psychological research indicates that watching people who behave aggressively increases the aggression of the observers. Watching films with aggressive characters produces a similar effect. In one experiment on this phenomenon, a group of kindergarten children were divided randomly into five groups. The first group watched an adult who demonstrated aggression towards a big plastic doll.

The second group watched the same scene on a TV screen. The third group watched the same scene presented in a cartoon convention (the aggressor was a big cat). The fourth group watched an adult who did not behave aggressively, and the fifth group did not watch anything. It turned out that after watching the aggressor (both “live” and on the screen), increased aggression was demonstrated by the children in spontaneous play. Children from the three groups that were shown the aggressor demonstrated not only a greater amount of imitation reactions (aggression towards the plastic doll) but also showed other kinds of aggressive behavior.

It turns out that public media announcements and commentaries about a suicide will cause an increase in the number of suicide cases for several weeks following the announcements. The extensively commented upon suicide of Marilyn Monroe brought an increase of 198 suicide cases during the first month, as compared to normal suicide records. This effect occurs because a famous suicide increases the psychological availability of taking one’s own life as the solution for existential problems that harass the imitators. On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that watching people who effectively handle different problems has a positive influence on the behavior and feelings of people who suffer from anxiety (e.g. of sexual contacts), phobias (e.g. of

snakes), and many other behavioral disorders. One of the experiments demonstrated, for example, that kindergarten children suffering from shyness more frequently try to initiate contacts with other children and play with them after watching another child who has successfully overcome social anxiety.

2.2.4. Minority Influence on the Majority

Both in experimental research and in real social situations, the opinions and behavior of the majority influences the opinions and behavior of the minority. This does not mean, however, that the minority is condemned to agree with the majority or to passive resistance against the majority.

There are cases where the minority (even a single person) can have a considerable influence on the majority. S. Moscovici demonstrates that such influence is highly probable when the minority is, on the one hand, consistent in presenting its opinion and, on the other, coherent (i.e. all members of the minority demonstrate the same attitude).

This situation leads to an informational social influence [compare section 2.2.1.] Members of the majority, seeing other people consequently announcing an alternative opinion and rejecting the opinion demonstrated by the majority, come to the conclusion that the minority must be convinced of their own opinion. This situation evokes an interest in the argumentation proposed by the minority. This confrontation of the arguments provided by the minority can lead to change of attitudes and opinions among the majority.

A series of studies on the mechanisms underlying the impact of the minority on the majority have been performed. The results of the experiment are concerned with opinions about different shades of the blue color spectrum. When the minority of the experiment participants (*de facto* co-workers of the experimenters) consistently described some of the blue shades on the slides as “green,” sometimes participants who at first were sure the slides were blue joined the minority in claiming they were green. What is interesting is that those “non co-worker” participants who in public consistently upheld their own opinions were also to some degree influenced by the minority.

It turned out after the experiment that during a test on color perception carried out among the participants after the main experiment, the green color garnered a larger share of the spectrum than in a similar test performed before the experiment. It should be highlighted that the influence of the minority on the majority underlies the progress of civilization.

New ideas that are born in the minds of outstanding individuals are often totally incongruent with what most people hold to be true. There were times when people were positive that the earth was flat and situated in the center of the universe. The consistent repetition—first by individuals, then by small groups of people, then by ever-widening circles—that the earth was spherical and revolved around the sun led to people finally accepting these facts.

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Biographical Sketch

Dariusz Dolinski is professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Opole and Editor of the *Polish Psychological Bulletin*. He has published five books and more than one hundred articles and book chapters. His scientific interest has broadened from personality to social psychology, emotion, and motivation. In recent years he has been especially concerned with the techniques of social influence.