

# *The Analysis of the Phenomena of Obedience and Conformity in the Society*

Yanwen Chen<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Nanjing Foreign Language School, Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, 211006, China*  
*a. 2498479395@qq.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Social Psychology is a branch belonging to the sphere of Psychology, preliminarily studying humans' behaviors in society. Conformity and obedience, two significant terminologies in social psychology, are frequently manifested in real-life situations, such as the case that emerged during COVID-19, which firmly illustrates the above phenomena, and currently, people experience these two situations, or phenomena, often. Starting from their definitions and experiments, this paper mainly studies the phenomena of these two situations, and this aims to investigate the causes of conformity and obedience. The methodology of this paper is literature review and theoretical analysis. This paper finds that such phenomena (obedience and social conformity) could be attributed to some reasons: culture impact, internet impact, pressure impact, education impact, and the existence of authority.

**Keyword:** social psychology, conformity, obedience, interpersonal influence

## 1. Introduction

This paper mainly focuses on obedience and conformity, which are two classical psychology terms. Obedience refers to the behavior that people, to avoid being punished or blamed, tend to obey others' instructions and thoughts. Conformity refers to the behavior that, living in a group and society, people are inclined to change or even forgo their thoughts to cater to others and the group. Obviously, people could not always have their own thinking patterns and could not always express their ideas. Many have lost the ability to think individually and critically on account of conformity and obedience, which could be seen in many examples: during the period of COVID-19, many were credulous about experts' ideas, thus losing the way to think by themselves; on the internet, it is seen that people are susceptible when seeing new arguments. Therefore, driven by numerous cases, this paper aims to analyze the reasons why people are extremely credulous and why they have lacked the ability to think independently instead of easily believing the opinions of others. In other words, this paper is written to find the causes of conformity and obedience in the society. The main methodology used in this article is literature review. At the end of the paper, several ways to ameliorate the situations, and hopefully, this could be of help to the relevant individuals.

## **2. Conformity and Obedience**

### **2.1. Case During COVID-19 in Chinese Societies**

During COVID-19, it was palpable that people were outstandingly susceptible to others' opinions. Hearing many and many news and learning about COVID via other information sources, they lived in fear of getting infected by it. Therefore, they would expect others, especially the so-called experts, to offer them solutions and ideas, and they would be very credulous, thus never distinguishing between various arguments given by experts. This was typical on social media. To be more specific, when social media, like TikTok, posted some new news and information about COVID, it was seen that below each video, there were thousands of proponents who praised the ideas. For instance, at the end of 2022, when COVID was prevalent and influential throughout Chinese societies, many so-called specialists contended that COVID would not carry any symptoms when people would be infected. However, such an argument could hardly bear further verification--evidently, most Chinese people felt uncomfortable as their bodies became troublesome, and most people caught colds, coughs, fevers, and many other derived illnesses. Accordingly, people's previous propositions collapsed naturally, and then they complained that the problems should be ascribed to those experts as they misled the Chinese individuals. Although some of the individuals had once cast doubt on these experts' arguments, finally it turned out that almost everyone believed in them.

### **2.2. Conformity and Asch Effect**

Conformity is the tendency for an individual to get their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors along the others within a group [1-2]. Conformity can take the form of overt social pressure or subtler, unconscious influence. It is powerful irrespective of its forms, and it could alter a person's thoughts, change the person's behaviors, and even resolve conflicts in the group. Conformity renders individuals comfort and dignity when an individual form is subdued by the collective form.

Asch Effect illustrates conformity. In Asch Experiment, subjects were instructed that they were participating in a study of perceptual judgment, during which, they were asked which of the three lines shown was the longest [3]. The answers were outstandingly obvious, and the judgement should have been made without too much thinking; nevertheless, all other participants, who were asked by the experimenter to give incorrect answers, all indicated that the longest line was the one that ranked second in length, which was highly evident. Therefore, being influenced by other "participants," the real participant, who had already decided to make the correct choice, eventually made the same answer in a bid to go along with other participants. In this situation, the subject knew the uniform and incorrect of the other members of the group before he makes his own response. As a result, he might give the same answer as the others to cater to the group. This is defined as Asch Effect.

### **2.3. Obedience and Milgram's Obedience Experiment**

Obedience refers to changing one's behavior on account of the command of an authority figure, with sometimes the case being that people are under supervision of others.

Stanley Milgram, an American social psychologist, conducted the famous Milgram Obedience Experiment in the 1960s in Yale University, the purpose of which was to test people's obedience under the command of authority [4].

The experiment was simple. Two individuals came to the lab to participate in a "memory experiment." One of the individuals, unknown to the other, was the experimenter's confederate and, through a rigged drawing, became the so-called victim. The other person, assigned the role of "teacher," watched while a set of electrodes was attached to the learner. Then, Milgram gave the unsuspecting teacher a small 45-volt shock to demonstrate what it would feel like and to enhance the

experiment's credibility. To this end, the "teachers" were told that such a transient hit would not lead to a permanent hurt to the experiment subject. "Teachers" were then asked to test those individuals' ability to recollect of previously learnt things. If the learner made an error in answering the questions asked, the teachers needed to shock the learners.

The purpose of the experiment was to assess the effects of punishment on retention and learning—would the teachers stop shocking the learners as the voltage increased gradually. The teacher was placed before the shock generator, which had a series of switches, each labeled to indicate a voltage, arranged from 15 to 450 volts, in 15-volt increments per each time [5-6].

Before the experiment, some professors in Yale University had once made some estimations. Yale University psychiatrists predicted that teachers' most common reaction would ultimately reject to click on the button of electric shock as the numerical value of voltage increased; plus, they predicted that the majority of teachers, approximately 68%, would not go beyond 150V, 4% would reach 300 V, and only one in a million would press 450 V.

Nevertheless, the result was dramatically astonishing. Over 60% of participants ("teachers") continued to obey the authority's persistent instructions to press the last button of an electric shock generator. Experts in human behavior and laypersons alike underestimated the teachers' degree of obedience.

### 3. Reason Analysis

Though the above concepts are different—conformity and obedience are observed under different circumstances—two concepts to one phenomenon—people would lose some of their own thoughts or hide them and could not express them overly, gradually losing some ability of individual thinking.

#### 3.1. Culture Impact

Cultural differences may affect people's thinking patterns. Individualistic culture, referred to as the culture like most Western countries, will be more likely to accommodate people who could think more individually. Such culture underlines intrapersonal values, morality, political philosophy, and their own thinking patterns. Thus, people's own thoughts and actions will be more accepted, valued, and propagated, and people in those countries will advocate that person's interest is more important than that of a society or a country. Individuals tend to reject authority figures from other groups, societies, or governments. Consequently, those individuals would be less likely to experience conformity and obedience.

On the contrary, collectivist culture, referred to as the country like China and Cuba, tends to emphasize collective interest, in which a person's value should be consistent with societies' values, group thinking therefore being more important. In such a culture, individuals' rights and thinking are restricted by groups, and therefore, people might lose some ability to think and embody their own thoughts. Collectivism holds that individuals belong to society, individual rights are subject to group power, and individual interests are subordinated to collective, national, class and national interests.

The more collectivist the society, the more likely it is to work together. In the previous Asch effect, people with higher collectivism have higher conformity behavior. Also, when asked to do something, in collectivist cultures, people are more likely to obey the rules, whereas, in individualistic cultures, breaches of social rules could be seen as drastically frequent, being a troublesome phenomenon.

#### 3.2. Internet Impact

When a certain event arises, netizens collide with each other thanks to different motives, positions, and interest demands, forming a turbulent public opinion pattern. The formation of public opinion is a process of mutual actions; notwithstanding the members of the group are independent individuals

with perplexing and variable psychology, which brings challenges to the command of authority [7].  
Overall network

Public opinion reversal events, behind which, group consciousness is existing to promote the development of public opinion. When the Internet gets more frequently used, more netizens see different arguments online, during which, conformity would happen as a result.

Netizens might cause doubt about group morality, which means a totality of conscious response of various classes or strata or interest communities to social and economic conditions, political system and cultural life. Congruence in idea is the feature of group thinking on the internet, and thus, individuals seem to agree with one, only idea which, probably, is proposed by some so-called expert, like the case mentioned before during COVID-19 about the issue of symptoms of infection.

Hence, as long as the strength that is strong enough is not embodied in a clear form, it is generally accepted by many, and those minority who have different ideas might not share their ideas in front of others on the internet. Members will get the illusion that everyone is in agreement, being also a kind of conformity. For example, many emergences of rumors could be attributed to the conformity on the internet: although some possess different ideas, they tend to believe the thought of the majority, and sometimes the majority would blurt out some unattributable, unreasonable rumors.

### 3.3. Working Pressure

The existence of working pressure in concurrent society is everywhere, owing to which, compared with last generations, people in current society are more confined to the workplace [7]. In working place, the tendency that nowadays people are getting more critical, thoughtful, and individual would increase the likelihood that employers expel the employees. Therefore, although, in comparison with past generations, people nowadays begin to have more individual thinking and self-awareness, making them think more in the workplace, the tendency discussed above could still result in conformity: for example, during the process of decision-making in a company, most employees would still withhold their ideas and avoid sharing them if someone having greater rights and reputation holds a different one. Also, most of the workers in the workplace are mandated to obey their managers' or leaders' instructions to eschew any possible conflicts from occurring.

### 3.4. Cognitive Patterns in Childhood

The pattern of education shapes children's life and future. Education also determines the ways individuals think enormously. Due to the relative lack of social experience and the ability to identify, judge and choose, it is easy to produce a blind herd mentality, especially among teenagers, which is then produced. Blind conformity will cause teenagers to blindly imitate the words and behaviors of others, which leads to weak self-awareness, poor independence and deficiency of creativity.

Teenagers are in a period of growth and ability development, and therefore, in such period, they are likely to experience conformity. This may be due to the following reasons [8].

First of all, teenagers lack a deeper and well-rounded understanding of the world; hence, they do not possess the capability to think deeply, individually, and profoundly, so rather than do something wrong and get criticized, they tend to believe others' words and thoughts. Cognitive dissonance would arise during childhood.

Secondly, teenagers, even Human beings, are social, so their life, study, work, and so on need to be in the collective. In the process of development, growing teenagers will feel involuntarily fearful when deviating from groups. Palpably, it can be seen that the fear of deviating from the group is also why teenagers choose to conform to others.

### 3.5. The Figure of Authority

The existence of authority could also explicate obedience. It is extremely reasonable that people will conform to authority.

The authority could be an entity, for example, the government. It is known that people are obliged to obey the laws, rules, and other legislations enforced by the government, regardless of their rationality.

Authority could also be virtual. Knowledge, especially the one that is written in books, is considered undoubted; at least, most people would not spontaneously cast doubt on some authorized knowledge overtly, irrespective of their own thoughts.

Another explanation could demonstrate this. When obeying authority, people usually get benefits. In other words, they would not be punished at least. On the contrary, when repelling the authority, people are possibly punished: consider the punishment and fine on account of breach of the social rules and legislations. Therefore, we can consider that people are experiencing positive punishment: the bad things, the punishment, are avoided when people obey the rules, and vice versa.

### 4. Approaches to Be More Creative and Critical

Here are a few suggestions and approaches the paper proposes that could make individuals more critical and reduce the behavior of conformity and obedience:

As starters, people should be encouraged to think of different ideas, and this is dependent on culture. Living in a culture that promotes individual thinking, people could be more creative.

Secondly, teenagers should be bolstered to think more individually. Being a test taker is not a good solution; instead, it is essential that kids are equipped with the ability of critical thinking. Additionally, they should be brave enough to do so,

Thirdly, the government should be more accommodating to accept, at least not reject, different but reasonable ideas. It could create some channels that allow citizens to offer distinct ideas and thoughts, therefore promoting the whole society to have a better atmosphere and make more progress.

### 5. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the causes of conformity and obedience, with definitions of them analyzed for starters. The reasons leading to the two situations could be ascribed as culture, internet, concurrent pressure, cognitive patterns in childhood, and authority figure. The paper vests new ideas and discussions for social psychology. Nevertheless, there are some limitations and flaws in the overall content and methodology in this paper. secondly, the article might lack some investigation, such as reviews and questionnaires of individuals. In light of endless and promising progress made in social psychology by extraordinary and preeminent researchers in relevant spheres, it is speculated that, in the future, more studies could focus on the comparison of obedience and conformity.

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