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COLLABORATOR STATUS, SUBJECT CHARACTERISTICS, AND CONFORMITY IN THE ASCH PARADIGM*

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SUMMARY

In an investigation of the level of laboratory conformity, it was hypothesized that (*a*) externals would conform at higher levels than internals and (*b*) *S*s would conform more to high status collaborators than to peers. A total of 40 undergraduates, 20 male and 20 female, participated. The procedures were those of a modified Asch conformity study. The *S*s completed Rotter's Locus of Control scale independently of the experimental procedure. Subsequently, collaborator status was manipulated to create high and low status conditions. The experimental results support hypotheses relating locus of control and status of the collaborators to conformity. A significant interaction effect between sex and status of collaborators suggests that status was a more salient variable for males.

A. INTRODUCTION

The study of conformity or compliance is one of central concern in social psychology. The classic experiments by Asch (1, 2) demonstrated the tendency to conform in the laboratory when exposed to the judgments of unanimous majorities. He found that a significant minority (33%) never conformed, a smaller percentage (8%) conformed on all trials, and the remainder displayed some conforming errors.

An issue not explored by Asch is whether certain types of individuals are more likely to conform than others. In the Crutchfield (6) experiment, conformity correlated negatively with intellectual competence and ego strength, and positively with authoritarianism. However, conformists in the Asch and Crutchfield type of experiments did not significantly differ from independent *S*s on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (3). It is an open-ended question whether we can define a conforming personality.

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A variable with an apparent relationship to conformity is the internal-external locus of control. This dimension refers to the extent to which people see a relationship between their behavior and rewards. Internal people believe that control resides within themselves, whereas externals believe that outcomes are determined by such factors as luck, chance, or fate (11). Other investigators have indicated moderate relationships to social desirability measured by the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (e. g., 7, 10), and Edwards Social Desirability Scale (4, 5). On the basis of the above relationships, we expect that external *S*s conform at higher levels when compared to internal *S*s.

The status of the collaborators is another dimension which determines the level of conformity. Relatively high status of confederates (*C*s) may elicit higher conformity. Crutchfield (6) found that minority group members conformed to a larger extent in an Asch-type experiment when they were the sole minority member. Jones (8) suggested that a low status group member may try to ingratiate himself with group leaders. There are suggestions, but no precise experiments, which define the relationship of status of *C*s to conformity.

This study will seek to determine the following:

1. What relationships, if any, exist between locus of control and conformity in the Asch-type experiment.

2. What relationship, if any, exists between status of *C*s and conformity in the Asch-type experiment.

B. Method

1. *Subjects*

The 20 male and 20 female undergraduates at Oregon State University who participated in the study completed the Rotter (11) Locus of Control Scale. Subsequently, they were recruited to participate in the Asch-type experiment.

2. *Procedure*

The procedures and instruments were exactly as followed by Asch (2), except for the manipulation of the collaborator status. The *S*s entered the experimental laboratory with six other students (collaborators). The investigation is explained as a test of the ability to make perceptual discriminations. Sets of lines of varying lengths are then compared to a standard line, the object being to identify correctly the line which equals the standard line. Eighteen different sets are shown and judged. On 12 of the 18 trials, the *C*s choose, by prearrangements, the incorrect line.

In the status condition, the collaborators were introduced as "graduate assistants," two as "senior honor students," and one as a "senior psychology student." In the peer condition, no introduction was made. The *S*s were subsequently debriefed.

C. Results and Discussion

In a two-way analysis of variance for locus of control it was found that externals conformed at a significantly higher level compared to internals ($F = 10.60$, $p < .001$). This finding establishes a link between belief in external powerful sources of reward and conformity behavior. Perhaps an external locus of control created learned helplessness, which in turn contributed to a willingness to conform. An analysis of variance for status *versus* peer conditions found that *S*s exposed to high-status collaborators conformed at higher levels compared to those participating in the peer condition ($F = 9.50$, $p < .001$).

In the Asch (2) study, the *S*s were all male, white college students. The Larsen (9) study was composed of both male and female participants; his female *S*s conformed at a higher level than the males. In the present study, it was thought that sex identification might interact with the status of collaborators and produce differential levels of conformity. A two-way analysis of variance with sex and status of collaborator conditions, analyzing for differences in conformity, was completed. The results showed no significant main effects. However, the sex and status of collaborator interaction effect was significant ($F = 6.64$, $p \leq .05$). The males in the high status condition showed a mean conformity level of 37.5, compared to the female mean level of 14.1. The mean rates were almost exactly reversed for the peer condition with males yielding a mean conformity rate of 13.5, and females a level of 33.5. The t value between males and females in the status condition is 2.64 ($N = 18$, $t \geq 2.12$, $p \leq .05$). Completing the t test between males and females for the peer condition yielded a value of -1.30 (N.S.).

Why do American males conform more to the status condition? The differences may be logically rooted in learned sex role training. Males are taught the salience of power as instrumental to goal achievement, whereas females are taught the value of interpersonal relationships (i. e., to get along). The level of conformity is determined by the social cost of resistance, which is differentially evaluated dependent on sex.

Larsen (9) indicated that Asch completed his studies during a period when political activism among students was low, a time known for stifling dissent and unobtrusive students. He reasoned that students in the early 70's were

motivated by many social concerns and would therefore manifest lower rates of conformity. However, since the end of the Vietnam War, student activism has decreased visibly. In its place we find a return to the concerns of the 50's (i. e., preparing for jobs and careers). Instead of political activism, many students are involved in more self-oriented movements (e. g., astrology or Eastern disciplines). Would conformity in the laboratory again correspond to these broader social changes as suggested by Larsen? To compare the conformity levels found in this study with those reported by Asch (2) and Larsen (9), the proportion of the *S*s conforming on one or more trials was calculated.

The results suggest a relationship between broader social changes and laboratory conformity. We found that 82.5% (or 78.9% in peer condition) of all *S*s conformed at least once, suggesting that conformity is again on the increase compared to the early 70's [Larsen (9) 62.5%, $Z = 1.79, p \leq .10$], and approximating that of the 50's [Asch (2) 76.5%].

At the conclusion of the experimental procedure, the *S*s were debriefed. Despite the classic nature of the experiment, no *S*s had expressed an understanding of the study or procedure. It was also apparent that they completely accepted the validity of the experimental rationale. During the experiment, *E* maintained observation of *S* behavior. The discrepancy between the *S*s' perceptual judgment and that of the unanimous majority produced some experimental anxiety evidenced by *S*s fidgeting in their chairs, nervously and laughingly expressing opinions of their stupidity (saying: "Oh, god, I must be blind," "What's the matter with me . . . Can I change my answer," etc.), and nervously tapping their chairs (two *S*s became very hyperactive—gazing at the others, sighing and breathing deeply, soliciting views of the others as to what was wrong with them, etc.).

The *S*s resolved this uneasiness by conforming in many cases. The salience of status for males was evidenced by the fact that all males in the status condition made some statement about the status of the collaborators during the introduction, whereas only one female *S* made a status-relevant statement. The type of status-relevant statements made included: "Well at first I thought it was my eyes or something since all those graduate students agreed, and I was the only one who disagreed . . ."; "I recall starting feeling strange being the only freshman in the group and figured it must just be me, because all of the seniors and grad students were agreeing on the answer . . . ," etc. These observations support the sex-linked salience of the status of collaborators, indicated by the experimental results.

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