

Social Influence and Groupthink

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ABSTRACT: In a strongly interconnected society, social influence plays an important role in shaping human behavior. Most human decisions are made through interaction with other individuals in various social contexts; the choices made in this way, in turn, influence human attitudes and behaviors. In this sense, it is very difficult to meet behaviors that are not affected by their exposure to the actions of other people. More often than not, social influence leads to changes in feelings, thoughts, perceptions, attitudes, or behaviors of individuals interacting with each other in different social settings. Previous studies show that social influence is responsible for human behavior that is not only biologically determined, as it refers to how people are affected by real or imagined pressures from other people. Depending on the form and the power exercised over the individual, social influence can take four different forms: conformity, compliance, obedience and disobedience or deviance. Another group process, often encountered, is represented by groupthink. Groupthink, defined as an excessive tendency to seek agreement between group members, occurs when three major factors are met: group cohesion, group structure, and situational context that can be amplified by a stressor. In recent years, social influence has been magnified by social media, with implications in various fields, from marketing to public health. By studying how individuals are influenced by others, we can gain a better understanding of human behavior and the complexities of social interaction.

KEYWORDS: social influence, conformity, compliance, obedience, group think, human behavior

Introduction

Social influence is defined as: "any change produced by the person's relationships with others (individuals, groups, institutions or society as a whole) on his intellectual activities, on his emotions or attitudes" (Abrams & Hogg 2011,195). Thus, the term social influence refers to the way in which people are affected by real or imaginary pressures from other people (Cialdini & Trost 1998, 151). Different forms of social influence can be exerted on any individual, which differs according to the form and the power exercised. Usually, when we refer to group processes, we think about the formation of norms, cohesion, conformity, groupthink, obedience and disobedience.

Group norms

Kondalkar (2007, 150) defines group norms as: "Group norms are a set of beliefs, feelings and attitudes shared by members of a group. These are also called rules or standards of behavior that apply to all members of the group." These are rules of behavior accepted and assumed by the group. According to the Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (Anderson et al. 2005, 112), norms have been defined as: "acceptable standards of behavior that are shared by group members."

All groups have established norms, in other words, norms tell members what they “should” or “shouldn’t” do in certain circumstances. Individually, norms refer to what is expected of group members in certain situations. When the group has approved and accepted certain norms, they act as a means of influencing the behavior of group members by applying a minimum of externally exerted control. Norms differ among the individuals, groups, communities, and even societies that share them.

A person’s behavior as a member of the group must be acceptable to all members of the group. If the rules are violated by an individual, corrective measures are applied, and if the individual persists in his behavior contrary to the group numbers, he will be completely neglected by the other members and may even lose the membership of the group through total disregard and will therefore lose their status in the group.

From organization to organization, norms may differ, depending on the nature of work and location. There are several types of norms that are found and practiced in all organizations. We refer here to performance, appearance and behavior norms (Robbins and Judge 2014, 169):

- **Performance standards:** the performance standard is set by the individual employee and approved by superiors. All individuals are expected to complete their work assignment by the established deadline. If a worker is slow and unable to cope with the workload, he is assisted by other members within that group. On the other hand, if an employee produces more than what is required, he will be reprimanded by group members and discouraged from producing above upper limits set by the organization, so that management does not raise performance expectations;
- **Appearance norms:** these are rules related to the dress code and the code of conduct in the organization. In terms of the code of conduct, an individual is expected to be loyal and show total commitment to the organization in which they work. Group norms are a very powerful tool for achieving high productivity as well as maintaining good relations between group members (coworkers, collaborators, management, etc.);
- **Norms of behavior:** guidelines for general behavior are developed by management so that all employees display identical behavior. These guidelines may cover various aspects of organizational activities. Thus, they can include: greetings used, punctuality, time management, etc., showing respect for the opinions of other members of the group, as well as the level of professionalism that an individual should possess in interacting with peers. These norms eventually take the form of organizational culture and are very useful for eliminating crises, conflicts or high levels of stress among the members of that organization.

Group norms are developed over a long period of time. These should have enough time to be formalized and named as rules that cannot be broken by group members. Critical events in the history of groups can sometimes be referred to as the norm. In the formation of a group norm, the previously acquired experience is very important, in which case a transfer of organizational culture “good practices” from one organization to another can occur.

To better understand social influence, we need to remember cohesion which is an important aspect of the group. According to Radu (Radu 2007, 79), cohesion: “measures the group’s attractiveness degree for its members. The consequences of group unity are greater participation in activities, more member compliance, and increased performance.”

Cohesion defines the degree of closeness that members feel towards the group. Through cohesion, one can identify the desire of group members to stay in the group as well as the degree of commitment of each member to the group. Group cohesion is reflected by the extent to which group members show unity, have a sense of attraction between them, and respect the norms established and accepted by the group.

Sprinthall, Sprinthall and Oja (1994, 349) argue that there are several factors that can influence group cohesion: status, group leadership style, level of cooperation, interactions between group members (friendly or otherwise) and threats that come from the outside environment.

Group cohesion can have positive effects within an organization if group goals and organizational goals are complementary. If, however, they differ, then group cohesion can be disastrous for the organization and produce negative effects. In such situations it is necessary that the organizational behavior of the group is emergent (members of the respective group must display an identical behavior). Therefore, it is important for the cohesion of a group to correctly identify the set of objectives of the group members and their alignment with the organizational objectives.

When individuals are part of a cohesive group, the desire for acceptance and harmony can lead to conformity, where members align their opinions with the perceived consensus. This pressure to conform can suppress dissenting viewpoints and critical thinking, which are essential for effective decision-making. As a result, group members may avoid expressing their true opinions, fearing social repercussions or the disruption of group cohesion.

Some specialists (Fisher, Ury and Patton 2011, 156) in conflict management emphasize the fact that, paradoxically, when a situation of crisis or conflict occurs within the group, the degree of cohesion increases. In relation to this aspect, Pânișoară (2008, 231), shows that: “we can easily notice that school groups are formed precisely to solve/debate problems, and yet their cohesion is not very high.” We can conclude that, in some cases, cohesion takes on positive forms and in others, it can take on negative forms, such as the phenomenon of “group think”.

Social influence

The term social influence refers to the ways in which people are affected in real and/or imaginary ways when they find themselves under pressures induced by those with whom they interact (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004, 591). Most often, these social pressures relate to conformity and obedience. Kassin, Fein and Markus (2011, 252) argue that: “conformity, compliance and obedience are not distinct ‘types’ of social influences, they are only qualitatively different.” In all these cases, the influence can emanate from a person, from a social group or even from an institution. In all three types of social influences, the behavior in question can be constructive (helping oneself or others), destructive (hurting oneself or others), or even neutral. Social influence varies in intensity along a continuum depending on the degree of pressure exerted on the individual(s). People can comply with or maintain independence from other individuals, comply with direct requests, react assertively, obey the commands of authority, or oppose strong commands through an act of defiance. It is good to remember that there are certain factors that cause human beings to yield to or resist the processes of social influence.

Conformity (Cognitive Function of Conformity)

Sometimes, the social influences acting on us are not beneficial. Instead they could potentially be dangerous to our health. To exemplify compliance, we could study a case where unusual events occur: in a high school, a teacher felt an odor similar to gas leaks in the classroom and complained of certain symptoms: nausea, headaches, difficulty breathing and dizziness. After this rumor spread, other people soon reported the same symptoms and the school was evacuated. Blood tests, urine tests or other medical procedures were applied to people who accused this symptomatology, but the investigations did not detect the presence of gases in the human body, pesticides or other toxins. Following this event, researchers concluded that the reported problems were the product of “mass psychogenic disease,” a profound, almost contagious form of social influence (Wang et al. 2017, 85).

Conformity is defined by Brehm and Kassin (1990, 393) as: “the tendency to change one’s perceptions and opinions or behavior, in accordance with group norms.” It is well

known that organizational members want to belong to a particular group for various reasons. The first reason would be that they want to belong to a group to satisfy their need for social security, the second reason is from the manifestation of rationale conformity to avoid conflict situations. When an individual belongs to a group, they follow the norms of the group as well as the decisions of the group, even against their own judgment. People who feel the need for affiliation are satisfied when an individual is fully accepted in the group by the group members.

In conflictual situations, an individual will go through the decisions made by the group. Conformity to group norms and group decision provide sufficient emotional strength to the individual to cope with organizational stress. There are some individuals who have a dominant ego factor, thus they may not accept group decisions and will refuse to accept conformity. Unfortunately, these individuals are called deviant. Such non-conformists have strong and independent individual opinions on issues debated by the organizational group. Because of this, they can survive as members of the group only to be non-conformists and will later be isolated and marginalized from the other members of the group.

Jetten and Ellemers (2013, 15), show that the conformity phenomenon is most often found in individuals who hold a certain role/position in the group and have considerable seniority in the organization. In a study, Pronin, Berger and Molouki (2007, 588), showed that people perceive that their peers are more compliant than themselves in various domains (e.g. some people bought an iPod because at that time the gadget was very popular, although they did not need the device itself). Part of the reason for this asymmetry is that although people judge others by excessive behavior and the degree to which that behavior matches what other peers are doing, they tend to judge themselves by focusing on and introspecting their own thinking because the sense of conformity blinds them.

From the above, we can conclude that people have mixed feelings about the notion of conformity. After all, some degree of conformity is essential if individuals are to maintain their place in the group/organization and especially to coexist peacefully. In this sense, Kassin, Fein and Markus (2011, 255) stated that the feeling of conformity can have harmful consequences: “like when people drink too much at parties or tell each other ethnic jokes because others do the same.”

In contrast to the informational value of conformity, normative influence causes people to conform because they fear the consequences of appearing deviant. It's easy to understand: early on, research has shown that people who deviate from a group's norms are often marginalized, rejected, ridiculed, and ultimately dismissed (Wesselmann, Williams, Pryor, Eichler, Gill, Hogue 2014, 45).

Ultimately, it is very important to understand the conditions that promote conformity or independence in order to determine the reasons for these behaviors.

Compliance, obedience and disobedience or deviance

Compliance is a form of social influence that involves performing an action under the orders of an authority. Compliance is quite different from respect (which involves changing behavior at the request of another person you respect) and conformity (which involves changing behavior to go along with group members). Obedience involves changing behavior because a person who has authority over group members asks them to change their behavior. Although personality characteristics can make someone vulnerable or resistant to either consenting or destructive submission, what seems to matter most is the situation in which those individuals find themselves when faced with authority. In certain compliance situations, group members adopt the default norms imposed by the group.

Popoviciu (2013, 54) defines compliance as: “There also is an explicit form of social influence, which occurs when someone accepts a request or suggestion under the conditions that the target has the freedom to refuse. This explicit form of social influence is called

compliance.” Compliance can take different forms: from the request of a known person, to the promise we make to someone. Most of the time the demand for compliance is direct, but sometimes it can be part of a process of negative influence (manipulation), of which we are not even aware.

Holtgraves and Yang (1992, 249), state that compliance strategies depend on the following factors:

1. how well we know the target (the person we want to influence);
2. knowing the role of each partner in the established relationship;
3. the personality traits of the interacting individuals;
4. the nature of the request we are making;
5. the degree of culture and education of the persons involved.

Chelcea (2006, 160) claims that: “a special form of compliance is obedience”, which represents “the process of accepting influence from people with a higher social status or with legitimate authority.” Individuals who are obedient are often rewarded for behaving in accordance with the opinions, advice, and decisions of an authority. Authorities who demonstrate consideration for the needs of their subordinates - as opposed to those who merely exploit the power differential - are likely to generate a higher rate of compliance (Koslowsky, Schwarzwald, and Ashuri 2001, 462).

Obedience consists in adopting the opinion of the majority of group members, with the aim of obtaining the approval of the group in order to avoid unpleasant situations that could arise due to the non-conformity of some group members. According to Passini and Morselli (2009, 101) compliance and obedience are not mutually exclusive, because they are inserted in a multidimensional structure that explains the complexity of the relationship between individuals and authority.

Differences between obedience and compliance. Obedience differs from compliance as follows:

1. Obedience involves an order; compliance involves a request;
2. Obedience involves obeying the order of someone who has a higher status; compliance means being with people who have a status equal to yours;
3. Obedience is based on social power; compliance is based on the need to be socially accepted.

Disobedience or deviance. Due to the fact that it is impossible for all members of a group to share with the same degree of intensity: feelings, opinions, and collective decisions, there will obviously be some members who will commit offensive acts towards others who will be judged by their peers and will be sanctioned to a lesser or greater extent, depending on the gravity of the act. Not being identical to their peers, some people will break certain rules or norms. In this sense, those who are certain of the necessity of norms, will show their disapproval. The sanction imposed on the deviant is directly proportional to the attachment towards the violated social norm.

Groupthink

As we saw above, social influence refers to the ways in which individuals change their thoughts, feelings, or behaviors in response to the real or imagined presence of others. This can occur through various mechanisms, such as conformity, compliance, obedience and disobedience or deviance. In the context of groupthink, social influence plays a significant role in shaping group dynamics and decision-making processes. The link between social influence and groupthink is a critical area of study in social psychology, as both concepts revolve around how individuals' thoughts, behaviors, and decisions are affected by the presence and opinions of others.

Groupthink is a phenomenon in which consensus norms exceed the realistic threshold of an alternative course of action (Robbins et al. 2014, 189). Groupthink is a psychological phenomenon that occurs within a group of people when the desire for harmony or conformity results in irrational or dysfunctional decision-making. The term was first coined by Irving Janis in the early 1970s and it describes a scenario where the pursuit of consensus leads to the suppression of dissenting viewpoints, ultimately compromising the quality of decisions made by the group.

Groupthink occurs when all members of a group think in unison, blindly following the group's decisions. In this case, no external pressure is applied. In the process of groupthink, it has been observed that incorrect decisions can be made because no one opposes that decision; from this we can deduce that the phenomenon of groupthink is not beneficial in group decision-making. The bottom line here is that when there is too much group cohesion, it can become dangerous in terms of decision-making. On the other hand, the processes involved in group polarization can create biases, and biases become dangerous in group decision-making.

Groupthink occurs when the need for agreement takes precedence over the motivation to obtain accurate information and make appropriate decisions. The psychologist Janis (1972, 112), identified three characteristics that contribute to the development of group thinking:

1. Groups in which cohesion is very high are more likely to reject members who have deviant opinions;
2. Group structure. Groups that are made up of people from similar backgrounds, are isolated from peers, are led by a strong leader, and do not have systematic procedures in the process of making and reviewing decisions;
3. Stressful situations can cause groupthink. Under stress, the urgency of making a decision can override accuracy.

In addition to the three characteristics of groupthink, Janis identified eight different "symptoms" that may indicate the occurrence of groupthink:

1. The illusion that they are invulnerable causes group members to be very optimistic, to get involved in making risky decisions and taking risks;
2. Stereotyping causes group members to ignore and reject those outside the group (they often oppose or even challenge the ideas and decisions of the group);
3. Self-censorship can cause people who have doubts to hide their fears or illegal behavior;
4. Unquestioning beliefs lead members to ignore possible moral or immoral problems, and to ignore the consequences of individual and group actions that violate moral codes;
5. Rationalization prevents members from reconsidering their beliefs and causes them to ignore warning signs;
6. Consciousness that censors thoughts to hide certain problematic information from within the group;
7. Illusions of unanimity can lead some members to believe that everyone agrees with them and feels the same way they do;
8. Often the direct pressure to conform, is sometimes placed on members who are uncomfortable and question the group's actions and decisions, which are perceived as disloyal or traitorous.

Some authors argue that groupthink can have some advantages, such as when working with a large number of people, which allows the group to make beneficial decisions and complete tasks quickly and efficiently. However, the phenomenon of thinking often has its toll, which is the suppression of individual opinions and creative thinking, leading to hasty, unfair decision-making and ineffective organizational problem-solving.

One of the primary characteristics of groupthink is the illusion of invulnerability. Group members may develop overconfidence in their decisions, believing that they cannot fail. This can lead to a disregard for potential risks and consequences. Additionally, groupthink fosters a collective rationalization, where members dismiss warnings or negative feedback, reinforcing their shared beliefs.

Another significant aspect of groupthink is the pressure to conform. Individuals may feel compelled to suppress their own opinions or doubts to maintain group cohesion. This can result in self-censorship, where members withhold their concerns or objections. Moreover, groups may employ mindguards - individuals who protect the group from dissenting opinions or information that could disrupt the consensus.

To mitigate the effects of groupthink, it is essential to encourage open communication and create an environment where dissenting opinions are valued. Leaders can promote a culture of critical thinking by inviting outside opinions, fostering an atmosphere of psychological safety, and ensuring that all voices are heard. Techniques such as brainstorming sessions, devil's advocacy, and anonymous feedback can also help counteract the pressures of conformity.

In conclusion, groupthink is a significant barrier to effective decision-making in groups. By understanding its dynamics and implementing strategies to encourage diverse perspectives, groups can improve their decision-making processes and avoid the pitfalls associated with this phenomenon.

Conclusions

Social influence is felt at all levels of social life, resulting in a state of tension between the values associated with individuality and the values associated with conformity. Conformity, compliance, obedience, and disobedience are not quantitatively distinct types of social influence. In all four cases, the influence can be exercised by a person, a group or an institution, and in each situation, the adopted behavior can be adaptive or maladaptive. We must remember that people do not always capitulate under social pressure. Moreover, the phenomenon of social influence can create an illusion of unanimity within the group. When members observe that others are in agreement, they may mistakenly believe that there is widespread support for a particular decision, further reinforcing groupthink. This can lead to a lack of critical evaluation of alternatives and a failure to consider potential risks, ultimately compromising the quality of the group's decisions.

To counteract the negative effects of social influence on groupthink, it is important to foster an environment that encourages open dialogue and values diverse perspectives. Techniques such as encouraging dissent, appointing a devil's advocate, and promoting anonymous feedback can help mitigate the pressures of conformity and enhance decision-making processes.

Sometimes, people assert their autonomy and do not succumb to pressures to conform; sometimes, they respond assertively to demands for compliance and groupthink, and sometimes, a group of individuals revolts against authority. Realizing that people often succumb to peer pressure is only the first step in understanding the process of social influence. In conformity situations, people adopt the implicit norms of the group. In this sense, we can say that it is very difficult to find a behavior that is not affected by the interaction with others.

In summary, social influence is intricately linked to groupthink, as it can significantly impact how group members interact, communicate, and make decisions. Understanding this relationship is crucial for promoting healthier group dynamics and improving the overall effectiveness of group decision-making.

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