

EXPLANATIONS OF INDEPENDENT BEHAVIOUR

Introduction

Independent behaviour refers to resisting pressures to conform (**non-conformity** and **anti-conformity**) and to obey authority figures (**disobedience**). Several factors are involved in resistance to conformity and obedience, and explain why such resistance occurs. Some of these relate to **the type of person we are (individual differences)** whilst others relate to the **circumstances** in which we find ourselves (**situational factors**).

How can people resist pressures to conform?

Clearly, not everybody conforms or is obedient. In Asch's original conformity study, 24% of those tested never conformed at all, whilst in Milgram's original obedience study 35% behaved in a disobedient way. So why do some people conform and obey whilst others do not?

Several personality factors help us to resist pressures to conform. These include **how nervous we are, our feelings of superiority, how much we need to be liked by others, and how insecure we are**. However, personality factors are likely to be influenced by the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and so identifying specific aspects of personality that *on their own* can affect conformity has not been successful.

As far as **gender** is concerned, women conform more when the task involves stereotypically male things, and men conform more when the task involves stereotypically female things. When the task is gender neutral (e.g. Asch's line judgement task), men and women do not differ.

One important situational factor in resisting conformity is '**belongingness**' or our **psychosocial identity**. We are more likely to resist conformity if we see ourselves as belonging to the same group as others resisting conformity. This can be linked to another form of social influence called **referent social influence**.

Another situational factor that helps us to resist conformity is **exposure to dissent**, that is, seeing others resisting pressures to conform. If we see others resisting, it makes us more aware of an issue and makes us think about it more than we otherwise would.



Exposure to dissent can help us to resist pressures to conform

A final situational factor is **psychological reactance**. This is defined as "changing our views to a position opposite to that expected". We show psychological reactance when we perceive that our freedom to behave in a particular way is going to be removed. This is especially likely to occur when the perceived restriction on our freedom is given by an authority figure or if the restriction is given aggressively.



This sign is likely to produce reactance....



...whereas this sign is isn't

Asch's studies also suggest ways in which conformity can be reduced. For example, Asch found that unanimity produces most conformity, but when one of the stooges gives the correct answer, conformity decreases dramatically. This is because the naïve participant sees the dissenter as an 'ally' who provides 'moral support'. If the group is unanimous, then the naïve participant on his own becomes a target for the whole group. However, if the naïve participant has an ally, then the group must direct its attention towards two people. Therefore, one way to resist conformity is to **break the unanimity of the majority**, which will reduce its impact.

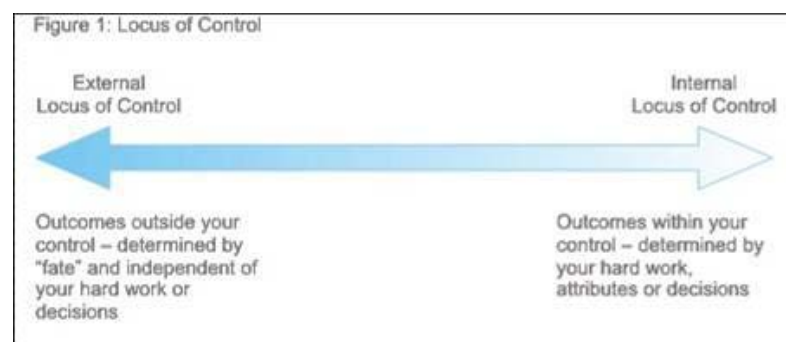
Asch also found that conformity decreased when the size of the group decreased. This suggests that it is easier to resist pressures to conform in **small groups** than in large groups, presumably because of the greater social influence exerted by small groups.

How can people resist pressures to obey?

As with conformity, both **individual differences** and **situational factors** play a role in resisting obedience. It has been suggested that people with an **authoritarian personality** are more likely to behave obediently, so we could say that people who are not this personality type are better able to resist pressures to obey.

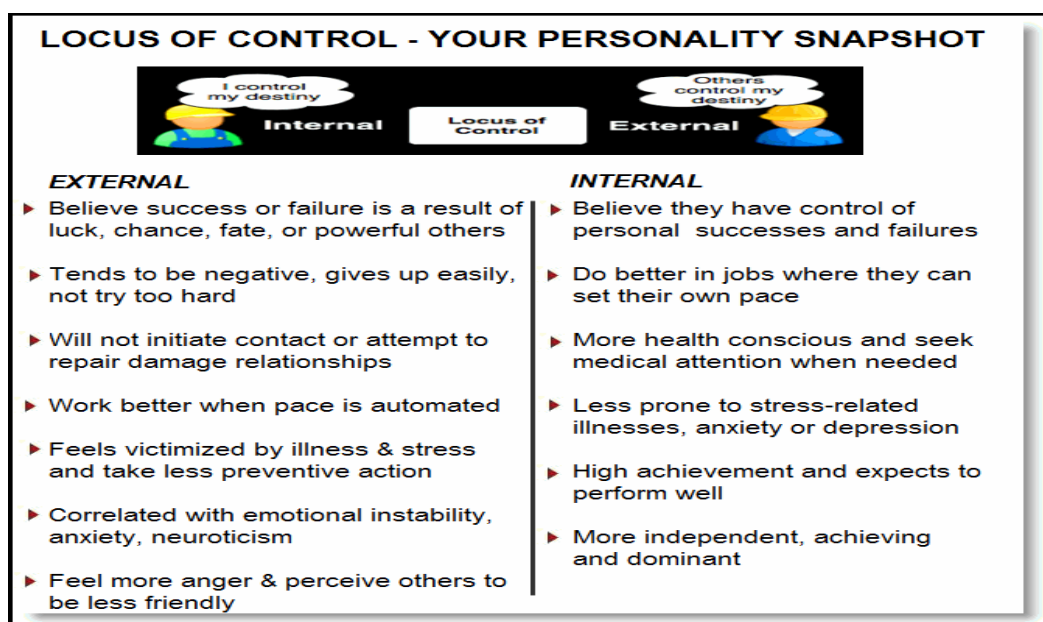
The most important personality factor is **Locus of Control**. This refers to **where a person perceives 'control' of their behaviour to lie**. There are two extreme types of this kind of personality:

- **INTERNAL:** These people see *themselves* as being responsible for their behaviour
- **EXTERNAL:** These people see their behaviour as being **beyond their control**, and that what happens to them is largely a result of **luck and other people**



Locus of control is measured using a questionnaire devised by **Rotter (1966)**. It includes questions such as the following, which are answered differently by 'internals' and 'externals':

- Do you believe that you can stop yourself from catching a cold?
- If you find a four-leaf clover, do you believe that it might bring you good luck?
- Do you think that people can get their own way if they just keep trying?



The different characteristics of 'internals' and 'externals'

Most people show both internal and external characteristics. However, research shows that high internals are more likely to resist pressures to obey (and conform) than high externals. There might even be **cultural differences** in Locus of Control, which might explain why some cultures (e.g. Japan) are more conformist than others (e.g. Australia).

Some of the variations that Milgram did in his obedience experiments also tell us how pressures to obey can be resisted. For example, disobedience is more likely when **personal responsibility** is increased. In other words, when the experimenter says that he is responsible for what happens to the learner, people continue giving electric shocks. However, if you are told that you are responsible for what happens to the learner, you are less likely to continue giving electric shocks.

Milgram's **Variation 3**, **Variation 4**, **Variation 7**, and **Variation 17** also tell us about how we can resist obedience. In Variation 3 ('Proximity'), the learner is in the same room as the teacher and can be seen by him. In this variation, total obedience dropped to 40%. In Variation 4 ('Touch proximity') the teacher forces learner's hand down on to a 'shock plate'. In this variation, total obedience dropped to 30%.



In Variation 4, the teacher forces the learner's hand down on to a shock plate

Variations 3 and 4 indicate that 'remoteness' helps us to resist obedience. When the learner cannot be seen by the teacher, total obedience is high. However, when the teacher can be seen by the learner, and when the teacher has to physically interact with the learner, the teacher is more able to resist the experimenter's instructions to continue giving the electric shocks.

The idea that 'remoteness' is important is also supported by the results obtained in Variation 7 ('Remote authority'). In this variation, the experimenter issues the orders over the telephone. Total obedience dropped to 20%, indicating that it is much easier to resist pressures to obey when the person issuing the orders cannot be seen.

In Variation 17 ('Two peers rebel'), two stooge teachers refuse to continue after 210 Volts. The effect of this is to reduce total obedience in the naïve teacher to just 10%. This shows how **exposure to dissent** can help people resist pressures to obey as well as pressures to conform.

Milgram saw **education** as being one of the most important factors in reducing obedience (along with **encouraging people to question authority** and **exposing people to the actions of disobedient models**). He actually

supplied schools and colleges with his film so that students could see it in the American equivalent of PSE. Now you've seen the film, perhaps you'll think twice before doing what you're told to do...



Resisting pressures to obey: One man refuses orders from the Chinese army to get out of the way. Eventually, the tanks turned around...