Social influence can be summarised as the idea that humans, as social creatures, allow other humans to either directly or indirectly influence their own behaviour so that they may better function as part of a group or even society as a whole. This essay will be exploring the ideas of social influence from a psychological perspective by analysing ideas and experiments performed by psychologists concerning social influence and then applying them to an educational context in order to further understand how these ideas function in different circumstances.

“First and foremost people need to belong (to relationships and groups) in order to survive” (Fiske, 2009). Humans have formed what can be argued to be the most complex society in the entire world and with that comes the need to feel accepted. This is often called Herd Mentality and is defined as “the general acceptance of a practice of belief primarily not due to comparative merit but to the popularity itself” (Brody and Kern, 2004). This notion of conformity can be outlined as the idea that many people will not confront an idea that may even be disagreeable due to the fact that they do not want to disrupt the status quo and disagree with the majority.

In 1951 a psychologist named Solomon Asch performed an experiment, expanding on the work done previously by Muzafer Sherif in 1935, in order to explore this very idea of conformity and Herd Mentality. The aim of the experiment was to see if the influence of an unanimous majority could influence the decisions of an individual and force them to conform. Using a sample of 50 male students, the subject of the experiment was placed in a group of seven other participants (confederates of Asch) who were told to give unanimous incorrect answers - this was unknown to the subject. What was found was that most of the subjects “did not really believe their conforming answers, but had gone along with the group for fear of being ridiculed or thought ‘peculiar’ ” (McLeod, 2008). It was also found that 75% of the subjects conformed to the majority at least once and 32% of participants conformed on the majority of questions.

Asch’s experiments correlates and has relevance to educational contexts, especially environments such as classrooms as “children do not see themselves as equally adequate in all domains” (Harter and Pike, 1984). Based on this assumption and the experiments done by Asch it could be assumed that children may change answers or even not answer at all due to fear of being incorrect or being seen not to share the same opinion of their class mates, thus risking social exclusion. In order to combat this educators may consider allowing students to keep answers to themselves until they have established the confidence to voice their own opinion. This approached is supported by Asch’s conformity experiment which found that when subjects were
allowed to write down their answers rather than announce them they no longer felt the need to conform.

Another major aspect of social influence is the idea of obedience, how it conflicts with our own personal beliefs and how far we are willing to obey authority before our own morals and conscious will not allow us to. On the surface humans can be thought of as obedient creatures, we respect rules and regulations and in general will listen to and obey authority figures such as the government. Even when we as a society disagree or rebel against authority, in most cases it is “Civil disobedience” – we disobey but are civil about it” (Edkins and Zehfuss, 2013).

In July of 1961 Stanley Milgram began experiments exploring the idea obedience and how far people would be willing to obey an authority figure despite the knowledge that what they are doing is morally wrong. The experiment wanted to explore the idea of whether officers of the Nazi party in Germany were simply obeying orders from authority and if so, Milgram wanted to see if he was able to morally compromise normal Americans in the same way he imagined the Nazi officers may have had to compromise their own morals. In the experiment participants were asked to ask a subject (who was a confederate to Milgram) a series of questions. Each time a question was answered incorrect they were asked to deliver an increasingly powerful electric shock. The person being asked the questions would scream out in pain, but whenever the subject asked if what they were doing was acceptable, a man in a lab coat (another confederate to Milgram acting as the authority figure) would simply tell them to continue. The results of this experiment showed that 65% of participants were willing to administer a 450v deadly shock to the subject being questioned. This demonstrated and proved Milgram’s hypothesis that supposedly normal people can and will commit out of character and immoral acts when asked to by an authority figure.

In terms of use in an educational context, the educator themselves often acts as the authority figure. This can allow for a certain aspect of control within the environment and over the students when delivering lessons. This can be seen as especially prevalent in the early stages of education when the student may find themselves in an unfamiliar environment but with a clear figure of authority and are therefore more willing to conform and be obedient.

However Milgram’s experiment can also be rather hard to apply to an educational context due to vast differences in context (as well as the extreme nature of the experiment). In an educational environment the idea of “civil disobedience” (Edkins and Zehfuss, 2013) is not only often seen, but even encouraged. Students are often asked and expected to question educators in order to better understand the subject
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or skill being taught. Milgram’s theory can also be hard to apply to early years children due to them being in Piaget’s egocentric stage of child development in which the child may yet to have the concept of any kind of authority, where in some cases even the child’s own parents may have difficulty controlling their child’s obedience.

One of the more extreme examples of social influence comes from the research done by Zimbardo into the supposed Lucifer effect -the act of making good people evil. It is relatively hard to apply Zimbardo’s theory to an educational context due to the controversial nature of the experiments as well as the fact that the experiment itself explores the extreme ends of the behavioural spectrum, for example, turning good people evil. However, by looking into how positions of authority and power can affect people in different ways is a good way to look assess how group activities and distribution of power can create tensions as well as allowing for self-reflection, as an educator, to ensure that the authority you possess is being used well.

The aim of Zimbardo’s infamous Stanford prison experiment, which took place in 1973, was “To investigate how readily people would conform to the roles of guard and prisoner in a role-playing exercise that simulated prison life.” (McLeod, 2008). However the results were unexpected even for Zimbardo himself. Having intended to run the experiment for a fortnight, it was terminated after just six days due to the students involved rapidly descending into sadistic anarchy. Upon being asked what lessons were learned from the disruptions during the experiment Zimbardo replied that he saw how people in these kind of institutions “could dehumanise people, could turn them into objects and make them feel helpless and hopeless, and we realised how people could do this to each other.” (Zimbardo et al., 2011).

This experiment and theory is arguably one of the most difficult to apply to an education context as it is unlikely that the pupils of any educator will ever be given the same kind of power as the students involved in the Stanford Prison experiment. Nonetheless it should be a consideration when setting group work, to distribute responsibility evenly so everyone in the group is on equal terms, or one learner may become a dominating force within the group.

In summation; social influence will most likely have a great effect on any kind of classroom or learning environment, due to the way that humans function as social creatures. As previously discussed when looking at the work of Asch, humans have a want and need to feel accepted socially as well as a social wish to listen to authority. It is the job of an educator to provide opportunities, and create an environment where students can express individual creative thought without fear of being wrong or needing approval from others. In order to reach their full intellectual
potential people must feel like they can and should think differently to others so new ideas can come to the forefront. However through examining the work of Milgram and Zimbardo it is also implied that, despite the experiments and findings being arguably less directly applicable to education, educators should encourage students to dispute social influence and authority due to the fact that simply following instructions of working to appease your peers can lead people into situations that can be not only be severely out of character, but are morally and ethically wrong.

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**Bibliography:**


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