DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 245 136 CG 017 506

AUTHOR Bushman, Brad J.
TITLE Perceived Symbols of Authority and Their Influence on Conformity.
PUB DATE Oct 83
NOTE 28p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Northern Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association (1st, Jackson Hole, WY, October 13-15, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; Age Differences; Altruism; Clothing; *Conformity; Influences; Perception; *Power Structure; Reaction Time; Sex Differences; *Status
IDENTIFIERS *Authority Figures

ABSTRACT

Although there are many variables that influence conformity, Bickman (1974) found that the apparel of the person making a request had a significant influence on conformity. To evaluate other factorswhicn may influence conformity (gender, age, status of the conforming subject, and altruism in conforming), 150 adult pedestrians (45% female, 71% white) participated in a replication of Bickman's dime and parking meter study on a major street in Salt Lake City, Utah. Subjects were approached by one of three men representing different authority roles and statuses (no authority dressed as a blue collar worker; status authority dressed as a businessman; and role authority dressed as a fireman), and told to give the experimenter a dime for the parking meter. Data on type of conformity and reasons for nonconformity were collected. An analysis of the results showed that conformity significantly increased as perceived authority increased. Female subjects were not significantly more altruisitc than male subjects. Older subjects (over 30 years) conformed significantly more than younger subjects in the role authority condition. No significant difference between subject status, as determined by apparel, and conformity was observed. Altruistic conformity was signficantly less as perceived authority increased, and nonconforming subjects were significantly less hostile as perceived authority increased. The latency between request and conformity decreased as perceived authority increased. (BL)

PERCEIVED SYMBOLS OF AUTHORITY AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON CONFORMITY

Brad J. Bushman

Weber State College

Running Head: PERCEIVED SYMBOLS OF AUTHORITY AND CONFORMITY.

Abstract

There are many variables that influence conformity. With regards to individuals making requests of others, Bickman (1974) found that the apparel of the person making the request significantly influenced conformity. This study evaluates other factors such as gender, age, status of the conforming subject, and altruisim in conforming. Ss were involved in a replication of Bickman's (1974) dime and parking meter study. Results show that the dress of the perceived authority not only affects the number of Ss who conform, but also the type of conformity, the type of nonconformity, and the latency between request and conformity. Older Ss were also significantly more conforming than younger Ss in the role authority condition.

Perceived Symbols of Authority and Their Influence on Conformity

In society we are taught to obey, rather than question authorities. But what makes an individual an authority? Often an individual is recognized as an authority when they are perceived as such. Our initial perceptions may be largely determined by apparel. This is especially true of uniforms, because uniforms make the wearer's status much more visible (Joseph & Alex, 1972).

Uniforms have been found to influence several things, such as: honesty (Bickman, 1971), helping behavior (Emswiller et al., 1971; Raymond & Unger, 1971), political behavior (Suedfeld et al, 1971; Zimbardo, 1971), aggression (Borden, 1975), and conformity (Bickman, 1974). Bickman (1974) conducted several field studies concerning the influence of uniforms on conformity. Bickman's studies involved three levels of perceived authority: a civilian, a milkman, and a guard. Bickman found that when requests were made from an individual that was perceived as an authority, conformity was indeed higher.

Bickman's (1974) study dealt only with the variable of perceived symbols of authority. In determining the reasons for conformity one needs to consider other variables, besides perceived symbols of authority, such as altruistic tendencies, age, socioeconomic class, and anticipated rewards or punishments for conforming.

In regards to altruistic tendencies, females have demonstrated higher scores on altruism scales (Hales & Fenner, 1973). Black et al. (1974) found that females predicted more altruistic responses than males in situations involving conflicts between self interest and altruism. Because of these findings, this experiment purposes that altruistic conformity will be higher for female Ss than for male Ss.

Bass (1961) has reviewed a number of studies associated with conformity and has found the older a person is, the more established his or her disposition is, and the less conforming he or she is. In opposition, Quraishi et al. (1982) found that persons over 40 years old were more conforming than persons under 40 years old. In this experiment it was hypothesized that older Ss would conform more than younger Ss.

In checking the relationship between status and conformity, Montgomery (1971) found that those with low status conformed most, followed by those with middle status. Those with high status were found to be the least conforming. It was hypothesized in this experiment that lower status Ss, as determined by apparel, would conform more than higher status Ss.

Another variable in conformity is the perceived reason for conformity. According to the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), altruism should be lower when individuals conform to the requests of a perceived authority. One reason may

be that their primary motive for conformity is an expectancy of being rewarded for conforming to an individual whom society respects. This experiment purposes that altruistic conformity will decrease as the perception of the authority increases.

Overt hostility could be lower when one refuses to conform to the requests of a perceived authority. This is probably due to the fear of punishment that may come as a consequence of a hostile response. Consistent with the cognitive dissonance theory, this experiment hypothesized that overt hostility will decrease as perceive authority increases.

The author also believes that latency is influenced by perceived symbols of authority. That is, when a perceived authority makes a request, as the perception of the authority increases, latency should decrease between request and conformity.

The purpose of this experiment is to replicate Bickman's (1974) dime and parking meter experiment. In addition, this study seeks to determine some characteristics of people who conform, some of the reasons for their conformity, and some of the reasons for nonconformity.

There are seven hypotheses in this experiment:

1. Conformity will increase as perceived authority increases.

2. Reasons for conformity will be more altruistic for female Ss than for male Ss.

3. Older Ss (over 30) will conform more than younger Ss (16 to 30 years).

4. Lower status Ss, as determined by apparel, will conform more than higher status Ss.

5. The reasons for conforming will be less altruistic as perceived authority increases.

6. Nonconforming Ss will be less hostile as perceived authority increases.

7. The latency between request and conformity will decrease as perceived authority increases.

Method

Subjects

Ss were 150 adult pedestrians on a major street (main street between 100 South and 300 South) in downtown Salt Lake City, Utah. The study was done on a warm, clear Saturday in May. This setting was chosen to increase the likelihood of a representative sample of the population being available. There were several pedestrians in the vicinity during the duration of the experiment. The Ss pool was limited to pedestrians between the ages of 16 and 70. The age of S was estimated by the confederate (C), in 5-year intervals. The average age of Ss was estimated to be 40 years. Because of the heterogeneity of Ss at any given time, a quasi-random stratified sampling procedure was used. Selection was based on the demographic characteristics of age, sex, race, and dress.

After a S was chosen there was a delay in the choice of the next S, such that they could not have observed the interaction between C and the previous S. Overall, 45% of Ss were female and 55% were male. Seventy-one percent were white, 9% black, and the race of the remainder (20%) could not be determined. Most Ss were judged, by their apparel, to be middle class. Post analysis of Ss demographics show that there were no significant differences in the ratio of S types within each of the three conditions (no authority, status authority and role authority).

Design

This experiment was a field study, functional design with three levels of the independent variable; no authority, status authority, and role authority. In the no authority condition C was dressed as a blue collar worker. C was unshaven and wore an old pair of greasy coveralls, an old baseball type hat, and old work shoes. In the status authority condition, C dressed as a business man. C was shaven, wore a conservative two-piece business suit, white shirt, conservative tie, and dress shoes. In the role authority condition C dressed as a fireman. C wore a medium blue shirt, dark blue pants, and a black hat. The shirt had a patch on the sleeve designating the fire department (Ogden City), and a silver badge on the pocket. The hat also had a silver badge in the center.

C was 47 years old, 5 feet 11 inches tall (1.8 m), and weighed 210 pounds (95.45 kg). C was instructed to behave the same in each condition (no authority, status authority, and role authority).

While Bickman's (1974) experiment used four different Cs of similar physique, this experiment used the same C for all three conditions to control for variables associated with the demeanor, physical appearance, and other variables that may have influenced conformity. While Bickman's (1974) the Cs were between the ages of 18 and 20, in this experiment an older C was used to increase ecological validity, consistent with the assumption that authority figures are rarely young.

The experimenter (E) was a 23 year old college student, 5 feet 10 inches tall (1.78 m) and 135 pounds (61.36 kg). E dressed in blue jeans and a casual shirt.

The dependent variable, conformity, was defined as S giving E a dime (or other change if S did not have a dime).
The type of conformity was determined by a post test interview. On this basis, those who conformed were divided into four categories:

1. Altruistic - S conformed because he or she wanted to help someone in need.

2. Compliance - S conformed because he or she hoped to achieve a favorable reaction from either E, C or both. S response

could have been dual in nature, i.e. S wanted to conform to Cs request and help someone at the same time.

3. Unquestioned Obedience - S conformed because "He (C) told me to."

4. Ambiguous - E could not determine why S conformed, because their response was vague.

The reasons for nonconformity were also divided, by C, into four categories:

1. No change - S said they would give E a dime but they didn't have any change.

2. Questioned perceived authority - S asked C such questions as, "Why don't you give him a dime?"

3. Silent - S did not reply to the Cs request.

4. Hostile - S responded to the Cs request in a hostile manner. (e.g. Are you kidding? There's no way I'm going to give him any change!")

Procedure

The general procedure used was similar to Bickman's (1974) study. C stopped the chosen S and pointed to E who was standing beside a car, parked at an expired parking meter, searching in his pockets for change. After pointing at E, C said, "This fellow is over-parked at the meter but doesn't have any change. Give him a dime!" If S did not immediately conform, C added that he had no change either. If C did not conform after the explanation, C left.

To ensure an accurate and reliable recording of the data, both C and E carefully recorded specific information about each S after S left the vicinity. This was done using the following checklist.

Insert Figure 1 about here

If S did conform, E debriefed them. The debriefing procedure went as follows: E asked S, "Why would you just come over here and give me a dime?" If S did not respond clearly, E attempted to clarify their response. E then returned S's dime and briefly explained the nature of the experiment. After S left, E carefully completed the following checklist:

Insert Figure 2 about here

After collecting the data for each condition, E and C compared descriptions of Ss in terms of estimated age, race, and status (as indicated by apparel). Agreement was found to be identical in all cases.

Results

With regards to the seven original hypotheses, the results show:

1. Conformity significantly increased as perceived authority increased, χ^2 (2, $\underline{N}$ = 150) = 17.10, $\underline{p}$ < .001. Forty-five percent obeyed the blue collar worker, 50% the businessman, and 82% the fireman.

Insert Table 1 about here

In comparison, Bickman (1974) found that of the 58 Ss, 33% obeyed the civilian, 57% the milkman, and 89% the guard.

2. Judged by the reasons given for conforming, female Ss were not significantly more altruistic than male Ss.

3. Older Ss (over 30 years) conformed significantly more than younger Ss (16-30 years) in the role authority condition, χ^2 (1, $\underline{N}$ = 49) = 11.98, $\underline{p}$ < .001.

One-hundred percent of older Ss, and 57% of younger Ss conformed in the role authority condition. Significant differences were not found in the no authority or status authority conditions.

Insert Table 2 about here

4. There was no significant difference between S status, as determined by apparel, and conformity.

5. As judged by Ss verbal responses, altruistic conformity was significantly less as perceived authority increased, χ^2 (6, $\underline{N}$ = 88) = 26.60, $\underline{p}$ < .001. While 50% of the reasons given for

conformity were altruistic in the no authority condition, only 10% were altruistic in the role authority condition.

Insert Table 3 about here

6. Nonconforming Ss were judged significantly less hostile as perceived authority increased, χ^2 (4, $\underline{N}$ = 62) = 14.66, $\underline{p}$ < .05. Twenty-nine percent of Ss were hostile in the no authority condition, while 11% were hostile in the role authority condition. Thirty-two percent of Ss said they would have given E a dime if they had change in the no authority condition, while 89% of Ss said they would have given E a dime in the role authority condition if they had change. In addition, not one S questioned C in the role authority condition.

Insert Table 4 about here

7. The latency between request and conformity was significantly affected by the apparel of the perceived authority, χ^2 (4, $\underline{N}$ = 150) = 44.37, $\underline{p}$ < .05. In the no authority and status authority conditions 23-24 percent of Ss conformed quickly (under 30 sec), while in the role authority condition 85 percent of Ss conformed quickly.

Insert Table 5 about here

There was no significant gender difference. Female Ss did not conform more than male Ss.

Discussion

As with Rickman's (1974) experiment, this experiment showed a significant difference between the apparel C wore and the number of subjects who conformed to his requests. In the role authority condition the uniform affected C as well as the subjects. After the role authority condition C said "I can't wait to get this uniform off." He could not believe how differently subjects responded when he had the uniform on. C would say, ". . . Give him a dime!" The majority of Ss would look at his badge and say, "Sure."

Altruism was also significantly affected by the presence of a perceived authority. It seems that charitable acts, when requested by an authority, are somewhat less than charitable. This is consistent with the cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). The cognitive dissonance theory also clarifies the reasons why altruistic responses were highest in the no authority condition. Most likely subjects would not be rewarded or punished for conforming in this condition, therefore, they would believe that they gave for altruistic reasons. During the duration of the experiment, the one person who voluntarily gave E a dime, without C requesting them to do so, was someone acting consistently with their own role expectations, a nun.

C also noted that the nature of nonconformity was different in the role authority condition. While in the fireman's uniform C felt eight of the nine Ss who did not conform, would have conformed if they would have had change. For example, one lady said, "I'm really sorry that I can't, but I only have one dime and I need to make an important phone call." C stated that Ss responses in the role authority condition sounded more sincere. This was not the case in the other conditions. C felt that the majority of Ss who said they didn't have any change, were just making excuses in the other conditions.

It is also interesting to note that none of the Ss questioned C in the role authority condition, even though firemen have nothing to do with parking meter violations. This may be a result of the way we are socialized; we are taught to obey, rather than question someone we perceive as an authority.

All in all it seems that perceived authority is an important variable influencing conforming behavior. These findings suggest that those with authority roles have a great responsibility and they need to be careful in the way they exercise authority, especially when making requests of others.

References

Bass, B. M. (1961). Comparisons of the behavior in groups of self-oriented and task-oriented members. Technical Report, 25, Contract N7, ONR 35609, Louisiana State University.

Bickman, L. (1971). The effects of social status on the honesty of others. Journal of Social Psychology, 85, 87-92.

Bickman, L. (1974). The social power of a uniform. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 4(1), 47-61.

Black, C. R., Weinstein, E. A., & Tanur, J. M. (1974). Self interest and expectations of altruism in exchange situations. Sociological Quarterly, 15(2), 252.

Borden, R. J. (1975). Witnessed aggression: Influence of an observer's sex and values on aggressive responding. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 31, 567-573.

Emswiller, T., Deaux, K., & Willits, J. E. (1971). Similarity, sex, and requests for small favors. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 1, 284-291.

Festinger, L. (1957). A theory of cognitive dissonance. Evanston, IL.: Row, Peterson.

Hales, L. W., & Fenner, B. J. (1973). Sex and social class differences in work values. Elementary School Guidance and Counseling, 8(1), 26-32.

Joseph, N., & Alex, N. (1972). The uniform: A sociological perspective, American Journal of Sociology, 77, 719-730.

Montgomery, R. L. (1971). Status, conformity, and resistance to compliance in natural groups. Journal of Social Psychology, 84(2), 197-206.

Quraishi, Z. M., Motvani, V., & Kaura, M. C. (1982). A study of conformity and non-conformity behavior with reference to age, sex and education. Journal of Psychological Researches, 25, 67-71.

Raymond, B. J., & Unger, R. K. (1971). Effect of deviant and conventional attire on cooperation. Proceedings of the 79th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, 357-358.

Suedfeld, P., Bochner, S., & Matas, C. (1971). Petitioner's attire and petition signing by peace demonstrators: A field experiment. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 1, 278-283.

Zimbardo, P. (Chm.) (1971). Freaks, hippies and voters: The effect of deviant dress and appearance on political persuasion process. Symposium Held at the Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, New York City.

Author Notes

The author would like to thank Merrill May for his helpful comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript and for providing assistance with the statistical analysis of the data.

In addition I express appreciation to Larry Bushman for his support, and to Leonard Bickman for conducting heuristic experiments in social psychology.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Brad Bushman, 3986 North 900 West, Ogden, UT 84404.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Checklist of subject characteristics completed by C.

Figure 2. Checklist of subject characteristics completed by E.

Table 1

Percentage of Subjects Conforming in Each Condition

Condition	Conformity		Nonconformity	
	N	%	N	%
No Authority	22	44	28	56
Status Authority	25	50	25	50
Role Authority	41	82	9	18

Table 2

Age of Conforming Subjects

Age	Conformity		Nonconformity	
	N	%	N	%
Old	28	[illegible]	0	0
Young	12	57	9	43

Note. Old = over 30 years

Young = 16 to 30 years

Table 3

Verbal Reasons Subjects Gave for Conforming

Condition	Altruistic		Compliance		Unquestioned Obedience		Ambiguous	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
No Authority	11	50	3	13.5	5	23	3	13.5
Status Authority	4	16	7	28	12	48	2	8
Role Authority	4	10	1	2	26	64	10	24

Table 4

Types of NonConformity Behaviors Subjects Exhibited

Condition	No Change		Questioned Authority		Silent		Hostile	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
No Authority	9	32	5	18	6	21	8	29
Status Authority	15	60	5	20	0	0	5	20
Role Authority	8	89	0	0	0	0	1	11

Table 5

Latency Between Perceived Authorities Request, and Subjects Conformance

Condition	Latency					
	Fast		Medium		Slow	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
No Authority	5	23	8	36	9	41
Status Authority	6	24	16	64	3	12
Role Authority	35	85	6	15	0	0

Note. Fast = under 30 seconds.

Medium = 30 seconds to 1 minute.

Slow = Over 1 minute.

Demographic Characteristics				Apparel (Perceived Status)				Type of Nonconformity				Conformity and Description		
Subject Number	Estimated Age	Gender	Race (White—W, Black—B, Unknown—U)	Work Clothes	Casual Clothes	Semiformal Clothes	Formal Clothes	No Change	Questioned Perceived Authority	Silent	Hostile	Conformed	Latency (Fast—F, Medium—M, Slow—S)	Color of Ss Blouse or Shirt
1	68	F	W				✓					✓		White
2	42	M	W		✓				✓					

(Figure 1)

Demographic Characteristics				Apparel (Perceived Status)				Type of Conformity				Description
Subject Number	Estimated Age	Gender	Race (White—W, Black—B, Unknown—U)	Work Clothes	Casual Clothes	Semiformal Clothes	Formal Clothes	Altruistic	Compliance	Unquestioned Obedience	Ambiguous	Color of Ss Blouse or Shirt
1	68	F	W				✓	✓				White

(Figure 2)