

INFLUENCE AND PERSUASION

Foundations of Social Influence

Cialdini · Kelman · Milgram · Asch

PAPER 01 / 03

A Furtherance reference compendium on the intellectual traditions behind organisational design, leadership, execution, and culture.

IN THIS PAPER

This paper opens the Influence and Persuasion series in Furtherance's reference library. It covers the psychological foundations of social influence – the reliable mechanisms by which people's beliefs and behaviour are moved by others. The question it answers: what actually makes people say yes, go along, and obey?

Cialdini catalogues the triggers of compliance. Kelman distinguishes influence that sticks from influence that evaporates. Milgram and Asch supply the uncomfortable evidence that situation and authority can override individual judgement and conscience.

Robert Cialdini *Influence, 1984*

Social psychology · the principles of persuasion

CORE THESIS

Influence runs largely on **automatic** psychological triggers – shortcuts that usually serve us but can be deliberately activated to produce near-reflexive compliance. Cialdini distilled them into a small set of principles that recur across every persuasion setting.

FRAMEWORK

Principle	Why it moves people
Reciprocity	We feel obliged to return favours
Commitment and consistency	We act in line with prior commitments
Social proof	We look to others to decide what is correct
Authority	We defer to credible experts and status
Liking	We say yes to those we like and resemble
Scarcity	We want more of what is rare or fleeting
Unity	We favour those we share an identity with

METHODOLOGY

Field observation of “compliance professionals” – sales, fundraising, marketing – combined with controlled experiments; later extended in *Pre-suasion* to the moment before the message.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The definitive practical framework of persuasion, and the source of its common vocabulary. The critique: some individual effects have been re-examined for size and replicability, and the principles raise obvious questions about ethical use.

Herbert Kelman *1927–2022*

Social psychology · processes of attitude change

CORE THESIS

Influence changes people through three distinct **processes**, differing in depth and durability. Whether a change lasts – and whether it needs policing – depends on which process produced it.

FRAMEWORK

Process	Driven by	Durability
Compliance	Reward or punishment	Only while watched
Identification	A valued relationship	While the relationship matters
Internalisation	Fit with one's own values	Deep and self-sustaining

METHODOLOGY

Conceptual and empirical social psychology on how attitudes form and persist under different kinds of social pressure.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

Explains why some influence evaporates the moment supervision stops while other change endures – the depth dimension the compliance literature often omits. It remains a foundational and widely used distinction.

Stanley Milgram 1933–1984

Social psychology · obedience to authority

CORE THESIS

Ordinary people will follow instructions from a legitimate authority to the point of apparently inflicting serious harm on another person. Under authority, many enter an **agentic state**, seeing themselves as the instrument of another's will and surrendering personal responsibility.

FRAMEWORK

Factor	Effect on obedience
Proximity of the victim	Closer victim lowers obedience
Proximity / legitimacy of authority	Present, legitimate authority raises it
Group dissent	A single disobedient peer sharply lowers it

METHODOLOGY

The Yale obedience experiments, in which a majority of participants administered what they believed were dangerous shocks under instruction – studies now as famous for their ethics as their findings.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

A profound demonstration of the power of situation over disposition. The critique is serious and appears in the caveat: grave ethical problems, and later re-analysis suggesting the behaviour was less blind obedience than **engaged followership**.

Solomon Asch 1907–1996

Social psychology · conformity

CORE THESIS

People will conform to a group's clearly **wrong** judgement under social pressure. Even on an obvious perceptual task, a unanimous majority pulls a substantial share of individuals into agreeing with an answer they can see is false.

FRAMEWORK

Condition	Effect on conformity
Unanimous majority	Strong pressure to conform
A single dissenter	Conformity collapses – the key lever
Larger group (to a point)	More pressure, with diminishing returns
Private response	Much less conformity than public

METHODOLOGY

The line-judgement experiments, isolating normative pressure by using a task with an unambiguous correct answer.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The classic demonstration of normative conformity – and, in the power of one dissenter, its most actionable finding. The critique: the samples and era were narrow, and the effect size varies across replications and cultures.

A NOTE ON EVIDENCE

A caution on the classics: the Milgram and Asch studies are foundational but dated, and carry real caveats. Milgram's work raised serious ethical concerns and has been reinterpreted – the behaviour looks less like blind obedience and more like willing identification with a cause – while conformity effects vary considerably by era and culture. Treat them as powerful evidence of situational force, not as fixed constants.

Synthesis

Theorist	Focus	Key idea	Critique
Cialdini	Triggers of compliance	Seven principles of persuasion	Some effects re-examined
Kelman	Depth of influence	Compliance / identification / internalisation	Foundational distinction
Milgram	Obedience to authority	The agentic state	Ethics; reinterpreted
Asch	Group conformity	Power of the majority – and one dissenter	Era- and culture-bound

FOR THE OPERATOR

Social influence rests on reliable triggers (Cialdini), works at different depths (Kelman), and can override individual judgement under authority (Milgram) and group pressure (Asch). For the operator the lesson is that influence is *situational*: design the situation – seed a dissenting voice, build legitimate process, aim for internalised commitment rather than mere compliance – rather than relying on willpower or argument alone. The next paper turns to the structural counterpart of influence: power and dependence.