

From:
Robert E. Cialdini,
Psychology's Social:
Readings on Conformity
in Social Psychology.



A CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT CIALDINI → Arizona State University

Krupat: When we speak of social influence, the word conformity often comes up. Does the idea of conformity strike you as good, bad, or indifferent?

Cialdini: Some people don't like that term because they view it only in its negative sense. I think conformity can often be quite an adaptive and even enlightened response to one's environment. It doesn't necessarily bespeak a weak-willed, wishy-washy individual who is at the mercy of the winds. In the role of an information processing efficiency expert, you may take a look at the evidence and decide that the most accurate information about how to behave comes from the behaviors of others. Conforming sometimes allows us a shortcut without having to think too hard about things in our information-overloaded day.

Krupat: For years, social psychologists have been running experiments to gain a handle on the nature of influence. Based on what we know, would you say it is easy to change people?

Cialdini: As social psychologists who study behavior in the laboratory, we frequently can't answer that question very well. In our laboratory procedures we eliminate all of the sources of influence in the situation except the one that we are studying. What we see very often, then, is change that we can't easily locate outside the antiseptic, artificial environment of the laboratory. I think we need to take a different approach and look at the prevalence and prominence of change tactics and strategies that exist in the influence professions.

Krupat: When you say influence professions, I'm not quite sure whether to take you literally. Lawyers try to influence juries, teenagers try to get their friends to try alcohol, and college students try to get their roommates to lend them money. Aren't they all in the influence business?

Cialdini: But they are not all in the influence professions. Only the attorney is, because there is an abiding commercial interest in getting other people to say yes to a request. That's what I mean by a profession. The economic livelihood of these people depends on the success of the influence strategies that they use. Those practitioners who use influence strategies and principles that work will flourish, and the principles themselves will remain as part of the pool of practices and procedures that are passed on to succeeding generations in the same way adaptive genes are passed on. The upshot is that, if we look across the widest range of influence professionals and we see that the same principles have risen to the surface and persisted, that's our best evidence of what the most powerful influences are in natural interaction.

Krupat: Are you ever amazed that influence professionals do what they do so well even though they have never formally studied human behavior?

Cialdini: It is interesting that they seem to be able to know how to do this without ever having studied social psychology. I think the reason for this is that they are beneficiaries of decades of trial and error. And to answer your earlier question as to whether it's easy to change people, my answer is yes. If one understands how the major principles of influence work and if one understands how to activate them, it's possible to change people and to change them reliably and regularly.

Krupat: Even if influence professionals don't know why it works in any conceptual sense?

Cialdini: It's not their job to know why it works. That's my job as a social scientist; that's what you and I do for a living. That's why we also need to go into the laboratory after we've looked to see what works powerfully and systematically in the natural environment.

Krupat: But if the laboratory and the real world are both important, how can the research process best go about incorporating both?

Cialdini: We need to begin with systematic observation of a phenomenon that is effective, that works on people. Then we take it to the laboratory to examine its psychological underpinnings, why it works the way it does. Then we take that new information into the natural environment to see if our new insights really represent the way the thing works in the real world. And that's the final arc in the cycle that I don't

think is often enough closed by social psychologists. I once called this approach “full cycle social psychology.” We seem to think that the laboratory is the standard against which we should base all our knowledge. I don’t think so. The grand experiment that’s going on outside is still the standard against which we should compare our results.

Krupat: *If I’m correct, you have observed that arena at close hand in a way that would be pretty unusual for the standard social psychologist. Can you tell me a little about that?*

Cialdini: I had always been a fan of the sociologists and anthropologists who used the method of participant observation, which involved a systematic immersing of the researcher into the setting to be understood. What I did was to infiltrate as many influence professions as I could possibly get access to. I would answer ads in the newspaper for sales trainees and would learn from the inside what an encyclopedia sales operator told trainees to do to get people to say yes. I did this with insurance sales, portrait photography sales, and automobile sales. I also drew on some contacts with friends of mine and managed to infiltrate some advertising agencies and a couple of charity organizations. I interviewed police bunco squad officers to see what the con artists try to do, and I even interviewed cult recruiters to see what they did that so powerfully got people to join. And across it all I looked for the commonalities, the things that occurred in parallel in each of these influence professions.

Krupat: *That’s as fascinating as it is unusual. What did you find?*

Cialdini: I found six principles that had the character of universal mechanisms of influence, that seemed effective across professions, across people within those professions, across versions and varieties of techniques, and even across eras as far back as the turn of the century.

Krupat: *Let’s take them one at a time. What’s first?*

Cialdini: If we believe the sociologist Gouldner, there is not a single human society that does not subscribe to the principle of reciprocity, the rule that obligates people to give back to others some form of behavior that they have first received from them. That is a very powerful motivator of conduct in our culture. It applies to every single behavior, both on the positive and negative sides. We are socialized into it so thoroughly that we feel guilty taking without giving in return. So it becomes possible for people to influence us in their direction by giving us something first, by doing us a favor or a service or giving a gift. We can be made to say yes in that way, by the rules of reciprocity. The Disabled American Veterans Organization, for example, reports that when they send out a standard appeal for donations they get about an 18 percent return rate. But if they include in the envelope a little pack of individual-

ized gummed address labels, the success rate jumps to 35 percent. It virtually doubles by adding 6 cents worth of material.

Krupat: *I see. You keep the labels and repay rather than stay forever in their debt.*

Cialdini: Right. And when a company wants you to fill out a survey, another tactic that’s gaining popularity is to send you a dollar with the survey. Of course, people don’t send the dollar back, but once they’ve kept it, they feel obligated to do something in return. So they fill out a survey that they would never had agreed to do for a dollar if they were being paid to do so after the fact.

Krupat: *Principle number one makes good sense. What is number two?*

Cialdini: Number two is scarcity. We all tend to want those things that are scarce, rare, and dwindling in their availability. You might remember the Mazda Miata craze, where people were spending more money on a used Miata than they would have spent for a new one if it were available. But it wasn’t available, so that unavailability made the car more attractive by itself. Compliance professionals have limited-time-only and limited-availability sales. The scarcity is just manufactured to spur interest.

Krupat: *What is third on the list?*

Cialdini: Authority is next. I think here we’ve seen good evidence that people who are in positions of legitimate authority, experts for example, are able to get people to comply to their requests. People tend to defer to the directives of legitimate authority, and that makes all kinds of sense because legitimately constituted authorities typically have attained their positions by virtue of greater wisdom or experience or training. However, we often fall victim to authority directives even when they make no sense at all, it seems to me, because it’s such an automatic response. Advertisers will sometimes try to misuse this principle by hiring spokespersons who have an aura of authority in a particular area when there is really no authority at all. I’m thinking for example of the television commercials starring the actor Robert Young. He talks about the health consequences of Sanka decaf coffee or the pain-relieving power of Arthritis Pain Relief formula. And the only reason he is so successful as a spokesman is that he used to play Marcus Welby, M.D., on television. But that’s enough to produce persuasion in the minds of people who are not thinking, who are simply reacting to the influence.

Krupat: *I assume the reason that actors are no longer allowed to endorse products by saying they are doctors serves as testimony to the strength of this effect.*

Cialdini: I actually heard a commercial a couple of years ago where the actor began by saying, "I'm not a doctor, but I play one on TV." And then he proceeded to describe some product. That's the ultimate in mindlessness! Why should we expect that this guy who plays a doctor on TV should be more believable? But the Robert Young commercials were exceedingly effective in selling their products.

Krupat: *What is next on our list of strategies?*

Cialdini: Next is commitment. That really has to do with the principle of consistency and our tendency to want to be consistent with our attitudes, beliefs, words, and deeds. That means that, if I can get you to go on record, to take a stand in favor of some position at one point, I will be significantly more likely to get you to say yes to a request that is logically consistent with that stand at some subsequent time. The most famous consistency tactic is the foot-in-the-door technique in which a person asks a homeowner for a small favor, let's say to sign a petition favoring safe driving. Then two weeks later the homeowner is asked to put up a billboard on the lawn favoring safe driving. You may find people who will do that because they've gone on record at an earlier point as advocating safe driving and, in order to be consistent with that earlier commitment, they agree again.

Krupat: *I have fallen into that trap many a time. There's a problem in self-presentation, in terms of being able to say no once you've already said yes.*

Cialdini: You're right. Not only is there a desire on the part of people to be consistent within themselves, it is also important to be seen as consistent in the eyes of others, because consistency is a valued trait in our society. It speaks of rationality, logic, and honesty.

Krupat: *What's next?*

Cialdini: Liking is the fifth. It should come as no surprise that we prefer to say yes to the requests of the people we know and like. All you need to do is look at the wild success of the Tupperware party, which arranges for customers to buy not from a stranger across the counter, but from a friend, relative, or neighbor. When I investigated how a Tupperware party works, some of the people would say, "I really don't need any more plastic containers, but what can I do? My friend asked me."

Krupat: *That makes me think about a practice that cults are known to use. When potential recruits show up at a meeting, the group members huddle around them and say nice things. I recall reading that a young woman said it almost felt like sorority rush.*

Cialdini: It's called love bombing, in which you get unqualified positive regard from all the people around you. They tell you how much they like you and respect your decision to come and see what the group is all about.

Krupat: *Okay, what is principle number six?*

Cialdini: Social validation. We frequently decide what is appropriate behavior for ourselves by examining the behavior of the people around us. The evidence here indicates that we are most likely to follow the actions of others when those others are numerous, when there are many others. I remember the wonderful experiment that Miligram and his colleagues performed when they took a research assistant, had him stand on a crowded street corner in New York City, pick a spot in the sky, and stare at it for 60 seconds to see what would happen. Not a whole lot happened when that person was by himself, but the following day five research assistants stood on that street corner and stared at the same empty spot in the sky. Within 60 seconds 84 percent of the people who passed by had stopped to look up with them. It seems we assume that, if a lot of people are doing something, there must be value to it.

Krupat: *Now that we have gone through all six principles, does knowing about them make us any more likely to resist influence attempts?*

Cialdini: I think that's partially true. When we come upon one of these principles, we have to recognize that frequently they do steer us correctly; otherwise, we wouldn't use them as a guidepost for deciding when to comply. What we have to decide is whether it makes sense in that particular situation to use the influence of an authority or a lot of other people or someone we know and like. I would recommend that when we encounter one or another of these principles, we should take a step back from the situation before we decide how to behave. We should analyze what it is we are being requested to do in terms of its merits, not in terms of the way that it was requested of us. Especially in the important decisions that we have to face, it's worth taking that moment out before rushing in with a decision.