

CONFORMITY (MAJORITY INFLUENCE)

Introduction

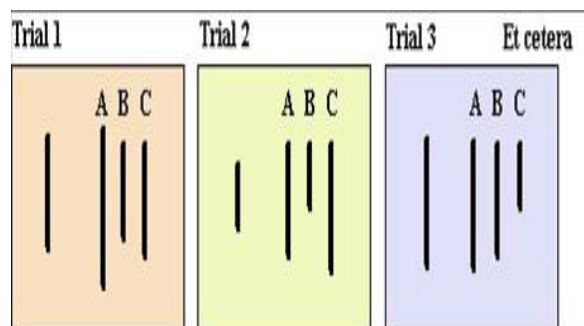
Broadly, conformity can be defined as '**yielding to group pressure**', and for this reason it is also referred to as **majority influence**. There have been many experimental studies of conformity. The most well known is a series of experiments conducted in the 1950s by an American social psychologist called **Solomon Asch**.



Solomon Asch

How did Solomon Asch study conformity?

Asch argued that conformity can best be studied by seeing if people agree or disagree with others who give an *obviously wrong answer* on tasks with an *obvious* and *unambiguous* answer. In his original 1951 study, Asch devised 20 slightly different **line judgement tasks**. On these tasks, participants have to say which of the 3 lines labelled A, B, and C is the same length as the line to the left of them, as shown below.



Asch conducted a **pilot study** to ensure that the tasks actually did have an obvious and unambiguous solution. In the pilot study, he tested 26 participants one at a time on each of the 20 tasks. So, with 36 people each doing 20 tasks, a total of 720 judgements were made. Asch found a wrong answer was given *only 3 times*. Therefore, participants got the

answer right 717/720 times (99.6%), and this showed that the tasks were very easy and did have one obviously correct answer and two obviously incorrect answers.

Asch then carried out the study itself. He wanted to see how much conformity male students at the university he worked at would show. Some of the participants (Ps) in the pilot study were asked if they would act as **stooges** (or **confederates**). Asch told them that they would be doing the tasks again, but this time in a **group**, with each person *saying out loud* their answers. The stooges were told that they would be seated around a table, and that there would be one other person (called the **naïve participant**) who was completely unaware that they were stooges, and that the study was about conformity.



The line judgement task being carried out by Asch (front right)

Asch told the stooges that he would be acting as the experimenter, and that they would be seated around a table in such a way that the naïve participant would be the **last but one** to answer.

The stooges were also told that there would be a total of 18 trials on which they would be asked to do the line judgement tasks. Of these, 6 would be **neutral trials**, and the stooges were told to all give the correct answer. The other 12 trials would be **critical trials**, and the stooges were told that they should **unanimously** give a wrong answer (i.e. they would all give the same wrong answer).

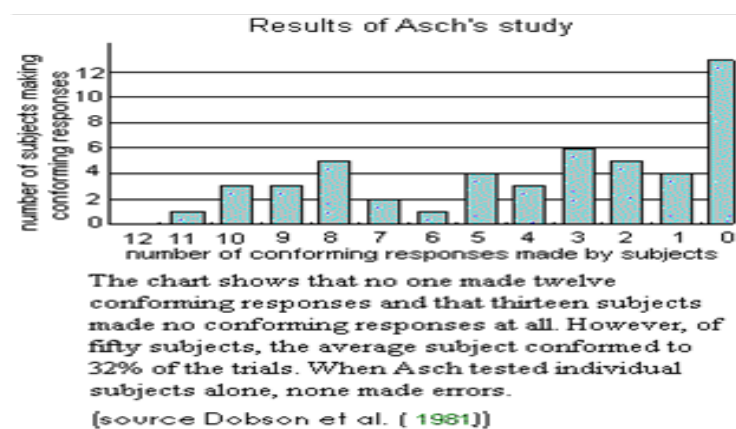
Asch informed the stooges that he would give a 'secret signal' when he wanted them to give a unanimously wrong answer. The critical trials and neutral trials were mixed up so that there was less chance of the naïve participant suspecting that the set-up wasn't what it appeared to be.



This naïve participant (the one in the middle) has just heard the previous five participants give the same wrong answer. He has to decide whether he will give the right answer or give the wrong answer, and conform to the majority's opinion

What did Asch find in this study?

In the original 1951 study, Asch used 6 stooge participants and one naïve participant. His findings are summarised below:



So, although no participant conformed all the time, one participant conformed on eleven of the trials, and three on ten of the trials. 37 out

of 50 participants (74%) conformed *at least once*, and the remaining 13/50 participants (26%) never conformed at all. On average, participants conformed on 3.84 out of the 12 trials, which is where the figure of 32% conformity comes from. Given these results, Asch concluded that even on a task which has an obvious and unambiguous answer, a unanimous numerical majority *can* influence the behaviour of a numerical minority.

How can we evaluate Asch's study of conformity?

'Evaluation' is an important skill at AS and A2 level. We don't just need to **know** theories and studies, we also need to be able to **comment** on those theories and studies. This commentary (or evaluation) can be **positive** (we can say why something was good) or **negative** (why something was bad).

EVALUATING THE VALIDITY OF A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY

The validity of any psychological study can be evaluated in the following ways:

Population validity (Studying a narrow **sample** of people might mean that we cannot **generalise** the results to the population as a whole)

Ecological validity (A lot of psychological research is carried out in laboratories. The results obtained in a laboratory might not be the same as those that would be found if the study was carried out in the real-world)

Experimental validity (If the study is not carefully controlled, then it might not actually be measuring what it claims to be measuring)

Cultural validity (A study carried out in one particular culture may not produce the same results if it was carried out in another culture)

Historical validity (A study carried out at one time may not produce the same results if it was to be carried out at a later time)

Another way of evaluating a study is in terms of the **ethical issues** it raises. Psychological research has to follow a **Code of Conduct**, which is a list of things that can and cannot be done in a research study. Some of these things involve using **deception** to find things out about people,

getting **informed consent** from people, and **protecting people from physical and/or psychological harm** when they take part in a study.

Evaluating Asch in terms of validity and ethics

- **VALIDITY (1):** Only male university students were tested, so the sample is very limited and doesn't tell us about conformity in 'ordinary' people (*population validity*)
- **VALIDITY (2):** The study was conducted in a laboratory and the results might not generalise to the 'real-world' (*ecological validity*)
- **ETHICS (1):** Asch *deceived* his participants about the real purpose of the study
- **ETHICS (2):** Because they were deceived, the participants could not give *informed consent*

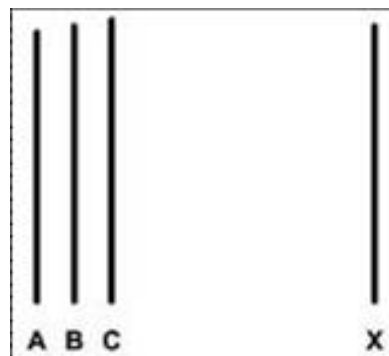
Asch's study can also be criticised because it is **time-consuming** (setting the experiment up, getting all the stooges in one place, and doing the 18 trials takes time!) and **only allows one person to be tested at a time**. Can you think of a way of carrying out Asch's study that overcomes these criticisms? Another problem is that the procedure relies on the stooges being **good actors**, and being able to convince the naïve participant that, like him, they are genuine. How did Mori & Arai (2010) remove the need for the stooges to be good actors?

What do the terms 'compliance' and 'internalisation' mean?

After he had carried out his experiment, Asch **debriefed** his participants and told them what the study was really about (Remember the participants were originally told that it was a 'line judgement task', not a study of conformity). He then asked participants who had conformed why they had given the wrong answer. Although participants gave many reasons, the most common answer was this: "I knew that the answers the others were giving were wrong, but I went along with them anyway." When we behave like this, it is called **compliance**. Compliance can therefore be defined as **privately disagreeing** with the group, but **publicly agreeing**

with them (i.e. going along with others, but *without* changing your own beliefs or attitudes)

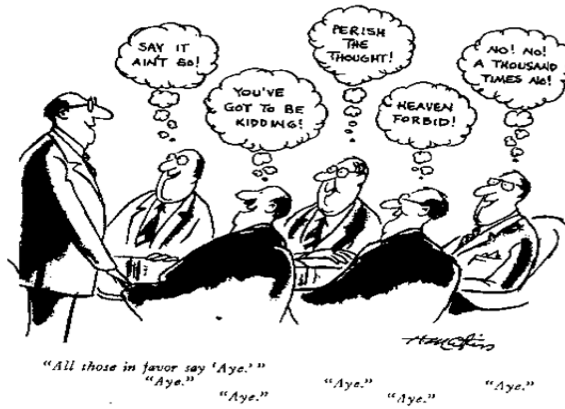
When a psychologist comes up with a way of studying something that works, what they then do is to start playing around with their method to see if varying different things produces different results. One of the variations Asch came up with was how difficult the task was. He was able to make the task more difficult by having the lines similar to both each other and the line they were comparing them with, as shown below:



Asch found that when he made the task more difficult, the amount of conformity increased. When he asked participants why they conformed in this situation, a common response was this: "Well, I didn't know what the answer was, so I listened to what others were saying and I went along with them because I believed they must be right." When we behave like this, it is called **internalisation**. Internalisation can therefore be defined as **publicly agreeing** with the group *and* **privately agreeing** with their view (i.e. accepting the group's belief or opinion so that it becomes part of our own thinking).

How can conformity be explained?

So why do people show compliance? They know that the answer they've given is wrong, so why give it? When Asch questioned his participants further they said things like this: "I thought the others would laugh at me if I disagreed with them" or "I didn't want to upset the others." What participants are telling us here is that they are conforming because of **Normative Social Influence**. This is when we conform because we fear being punished for expressing a different view or when we want to be rewarded for sharing the same view. Note that in NSI, we are showing **compliance**.



We sometimes go along with others to avoid punishment or gain a reward

NSI is most likely to occur when the costs of *not* conforming are perceived as being higher than the costs of conforming. NSI is also most likely to occur when group membership is important. NSI is a useful way of explaining bullying by children who may carry out the bullying behaviour even though they are uncomfortable with it. Not conforming to a group of bullies may mean that a child becomes a victim of bullying himself. Alternatively, bullying may occur in order to gain acceptance by a group of bullies.

Remember that when Asch made the line judgement task more difficult, he found higher levels of conformity. The participants told him that they went along with the others because they genuinely didn't know what the correct answer was, and so they were guided by how others behaved. In situations where we don't know how to behave, other people define 'reality' for us. The more unclear the situation is, the more we are influenced by others, and conformity occurs through **Informational Social Influence**. Note that in ISI, we are showing **internalisation**.



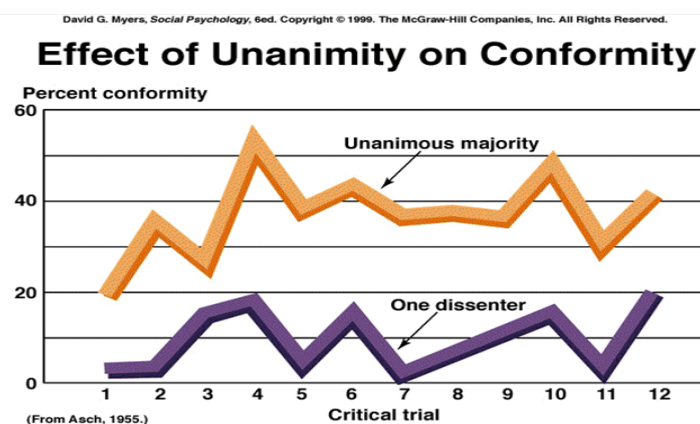
In a swanky restaurant you may not know the rule about which knife and fork to use, so you look to others for information.

The distinction between NSI and ISI was originally made by **Deutsch & Gerard (1955)**. Because they thought there were only two reasons why people conform, they called this the **dual dependency model of social influence**.

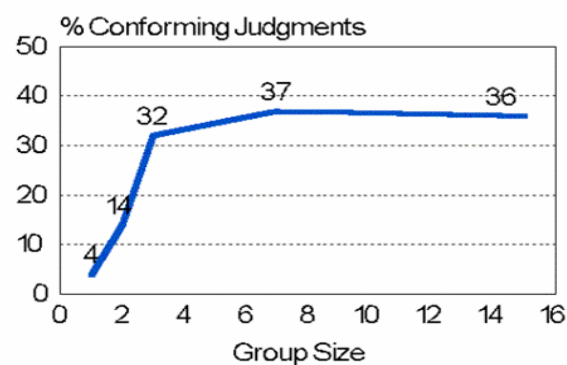
What other factors affect conformity?

As noted previously, Asch was able to use his line judgement task to study how altering various things affected how much conformity participants showed. Two of the more important factors he discovered were **unanimity** and **group size**.

Unanimity: In Asch's original experiment, all of the stooges given the same wrong answer. However, Asch varied the experiment so that one of the stooges was instructed to give the correct answer when the other stooges gave an incorrect answer. As the graph below shows, conformity drops dramatically when the majority view is not unanimous:



Group Size: In Asch's original experiment, there were **6** stooges. However, it is possible to do the experiment with **fewer** stooges or with **more** stooges.



As the graph above shows, conformity decreases as group size decreases. However, it is not the case that the more stooges there are the greater conformity there will be. There is as much conformity with four stooges as there is with eight or more stooges.

Social climate: Earlier on, we criticised Asch's experiment for lacking both **population validity** and **ecological validity**. If you look at any textbook, they all quote the average conformity rate of **32%**, even though Asch's studies were originally done in America in the 1950s. When researchers at Sheffield University repeated Asch's experiment in 1979 using students who weren't studying psychology, they found almost **0%** conformity (1 conforming response in 396 trials). They did the experiment exactly how Asch did it, so it can't be differences in the way the study was done that produced these very different results.

The difference can be explained in terms of the social climate that was operating at the time Asch did his experiments and the researchers at Sheffield University did theirs. The social climate in 1950s America was one of conformity to society. It did not pay at that time to express an opinion which went against the majority. However, the social climate in the late 1970s in Britain was much more towards the expression of independence (the dominant youth culture at the time was the anti-conformist punk movement). Thus, Asch's results can be said to lack **historical validity** - the conformity rate reported by Asch (32%) may or may not be obtained depending on the social climate operating at the time a conformity study is conducted.



The fear of communists (real or suspected) spread throughout the United States in the 1950s. This Californian car worker was beaten up for refusing to tell fellow labourers whether he was a member of the Communist party

Culture: Most psychological research studies are carried out in the USA. However, research carried out in other cultures has not reported the same levels of conformity that Asch reported. For example, in some cultures (such as Fiji and Japan), much higher levels of conformity have been found, whereas in other cultures (such as France and Portugal), much lower levels of conformity have been found:

Nation	Number of studies	Averaged effect size
Asch's own US studies	18	1.16
Other US studies	79	0.90
Canada	1	1.37
UK	10	0.81
Belgium	4	0.91
France	2	0.56
Netherlands	1	0.74
Germany	1	0.92
Portugal	1	0.58
Japan	5	1.42
Brazil	3	1.60
Fiji	2	2.48
Hong Kong	1	1.93
Arab samples (Kuwait, Lebanon)	2	1.31
Africa (Zimbabwe, Republic of the Congo [Zaire], Ghana)	3	1.84

In this table, the 'averaged effect size of 1.15 for Asch's study corresponds to 32% conformity. A figure bigger than 1.15 indicates more than 32% conformity and a figure lower than this indicates less than 32% conformity

The differences in the table above can be explained in terms of differences between cultures. Some cultures (such as the United States and the United Kingdom) are typically **individualistic**. In individualistic cultures:

- The emphasis is on promoting self-interest and the interests of the immediate family, with less concern about the needs and interests of others
- Stress is placed on the rights, not duties, of the individual
- Privacy is demanded
- Individual initiative is encouraged

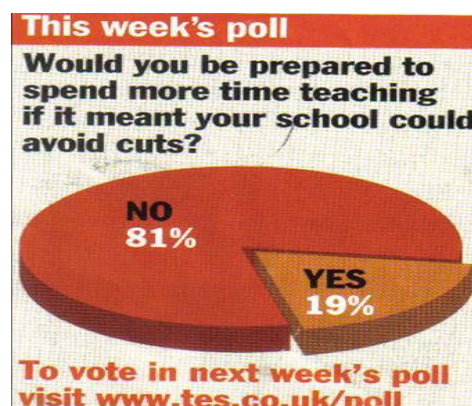
However, other cultures (such as Fiji and many African cultures) are **collectivistic**. In collectivistic cultures:

- Emphasis is placed on loyalty to the group, and the needs and interests of others. In turn, the group looks after the well-being of the individual
- Stress is placed on the duties, not rights, of the individual
- Less demand for privacy
- Group decisions preferred to individual decisions



Cultures differ in terms of how individualistic or collectivistic they are

Because individualistic cultures emphasise the importance of the individual, we would expect them to show less conformity to the group. Because collectivistic cultures emphasise loyalty to the group, we would expect them to show more conformity to the group. This is exactly what research has found. Thus, the amount of conformity in one culture will no necessarily be found in another culture. Asch's research can therefore be said to lack **cultural validity**.



Are teachers who respond to polls in the Times Educational Supplement individualistic or collectivistic?