

THE POWER OF CONFORMITY

Asch, S. E. (1955). Opinions and social pressure. *Scientific American*, 195(5), 31-35.

Do you consider yourself to be a conformist, or are you more of a rebel? Most of us probably like to think that we are conformist enough to not be considered terribly strange or frightening, and nonconformist enough to demonstrate that we are individuals and capable of independent thinking. Psychologists have been interested in the concept of conformity for decades. It is easy to see why when you remember that psychology tries to study the influences on human behavior. The differences in the amount to which people conform can help us a great deal in predicting the behavior for various individuals.

When psychologists talk about conformity, they refer to an individual's behavior that adheres to the behavior patterns of a particular group of which that individual is a member. The usually unspoken rules or guidelines for behavior in a group are called *social norms*. If you think about it, you can probably remember a time in your life when you behaved in ways that were out of sync or in disagreement with your attitudes, beliefs, or morals. Chances are you were in a group in which everyone was behaving that way, so you went along with them. This indicates that sometimes conformity is a powerful force on our behavior and can even at times make us do things that conflict with our attitudes, ethics, and morals. Therefore, conformity is clearly very worthy of interest and study by behavioral scientists. It was not until the early 1950s that someone decided to make a systematic study. That someone was Solomon Asch. His experiments offered us a great deal of new information about conforming behavior and opened many doors for future research.

THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

Suppose you are with a group of people that you see often, such as friends or coworkers. The group is discussing some controversial issue or political candidate. It quickly becomes clear to you that everyone in the group shares one view, which is the opposite of your own. At one point the others turn to you and ask for your opinion. What are you going to do? The choices you are faced with are to state your true views and risk the consequences, to agree with the group consensus even though it differs from your opinion, or, if possible, to sidestep the issue entirely.

Asch wanted to find out just how powerful the need to conform is in influencing our behavior. Although conformity often involves general and vague concepts such as attitudes, ethics, morals, and belief systems, Asch chose to focus on a much more obvious form: perceptual conformity. By examining conforming behavior on a simple visual comparison task, he was able to study this phenomenon in a controlled laboratory environment.

If conformity is as powerful a force as Asch and many others believed, then researchers should be able to manipulate a person's behavior by applying group pressure to conform. This is what Asch set about testing in a very elegantly designed series of experiments, all incorporating a similar method.

METHOD

The visual materials consisted simply of pairs of cards with three different lengths of vertical lines (called comparison lines) on one and a single standard line the same length as one of three comparison lines on the other (see Figure 1). Here is how the experimental process worked. Imagine you are a subject who has volunteered to participate in a *visual perception study*. You arrive at the experiment room on time and find seven other subjects already seated in a row. You sit in the empty chair at the end of the row. The experimenter reveals a pair of cards and asks you to determine which of the three comparison lines is the same length as the standard line. You look at the lines and immediately decide on the correct response. Starting at the far end of the row away from you, each subject is asked individually for his or her answer. Everyone gives the correct answer, and when your turn comes you give the same obviously correct answer. The card is changed, the same process happens, and—once again, no problem—you give the correct answer along with the rest of the group. On the next trial, however, something odd happens. The card is revealed and you immediately choose in your mind the correct response. (After all, this is not very difficult.) But when the other subjects give their answers, they all choose the wrong line! And they all choose the same wrong line. Now, when it is your turn to respond again, you pause. You can't believe what is happening. Are all these other people blind? The correct answer is obvious. Isn't it? Have you gone blind? Or crazy? You now must make a decision like the one described above with your friends or coworkers. Do you maintain your opinion (after all, the lines are right in front of your nose), or do you conform and agree with the rest of the group?

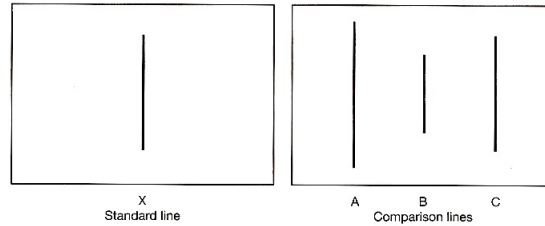


FIGURE 1 An example similar to Asch's line judging task cards. (Adapted from p. 32.)

As you have probably figured out by now, the other seven "subjects" in the room were not subjects at all, but confederates of the experimenter. They were in on the experiment from the beginning and the answers they gave were, of course, the key to this study of conformity. So, how did the real subjects in the study answer?

RESULTS

Each subject participated in the experimental situation several times. Approximately 75% of them went along with the group's consensus at least once. For all trials combined, subjects agreed with the group on the incorrect responses about one-third of the time. Just to be sure that the line lengths could be judged accurately, each individual in a control group of subjects was asked to individually write down his or her answer to the line comparison questions. Subjects in this group were correct 98% of the time.

DISCUSSION AND RELATED RESEARCH

The powerful effects of group pressures to conform were clearly demonstrated in Asch's study. If individuals are willing to conform to a group of people they hardly know about a clearly incorrect judgment, how strong must this influence be in real life, where groups exert even stronger forces and issues are more ambiguous? Conformity as a major factor in human behavior, the subject of widespread speculation for years, had now been scientifically established.

Asch's results were extremely important to the field of psychology in two crucial ways. First, as discussed above, the real power of the social pressure to conform was demonstrated clearly and scientifically for the first time. Second, and perhaps even more important, this early research sparked a huge wave of additional studies that continue right up to the present. The body of research that has accumulated since Asch's early studies has greatly elaborated our knowledge of the specific factors that determine the effects conformity has on our behavior. Some of these findings follow:

1. *Social support.* Asch conducted his same experiment with a slight variation. He altered the answers of the confederates so that in the test condition one of the seven gave the correct answer. When this occurred, only 5% of the subjects agreed with the group consensus. Apparently, a single ally is all you need to "stick to your guns" and resist the pressure to conform. This finding has been supported by several later studies (see, e.g., Morris & Miller, 1975).
2. *Attraction and commitment to the group.* Later research has demonstrated that the more attracted and committed you are to a particular group, the more likely you are to conform to the behavior and attitudes of that group (see Forsyth, 1983). If you like the group and feel that you belong with them (they are your *reference group*) your tendency to conform to that group will be very strong.
3. *Size of the group.* At first, research by Asch and others demonstrated that the tendency to conform increases as the size of the group increases. However, upon further examination, it was found that this connection is not so simple. While it is true that conformity increases as the size of the group increases, this only holds for groups up to six or seven members. As the group size increases beyond this number, conformity levels off, and even decreases somewhat. This is shown graphically in Figure 2. Why is this? Well, Asch has suggested that as the group becomes large, people may begin to suspect the other

members of working together purposefully to affect their behavior and they become resistant to this obvious pressure.

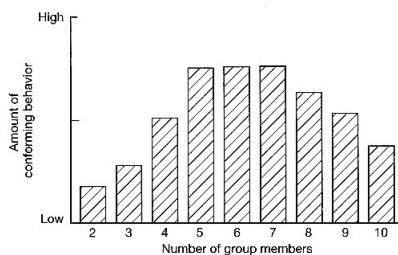


FIGURE 2 The relationship between group size and conformity. (Adapted from p. 35.)

4. *Sex*. Do you think there is a difference between men and women in their tendency or willingness to conform? Early studies that followed Asch's work indicated that women seemed to be much more willing to conform than men. This was such a strong and frequently repeated finding that it entered the psychological literature as an accepted difference between the sexes. However, later research drew this notion into question. It appears that many of the early studies (conducted by men) inadvertently created testing conditions that were more familiar and comfortable for men in those days than for women. Psychologists know that people will tend to conform more when placed in a situation where the appropriate behavior is unclear. Therefore, the finding of greater conformity among women may have simply been a systematic error caused by subtle (and unintentional) biases in the methods used. More recent research under better controlled conditions has failed to find this sex difference in conformity behavior (see Sistrunk & McDavid, 1971, for a discussion of these gender-related issues).

Numerous additional areas related to the issue of conformity have been studied as well. These include, cultural *influences*, the amount of information available when making decisions about conforming, social norms, personal privacy, and many others.

CRITICISMS

Asch's work on conformity has received widespread support and acceptance. It has been replicated in many studies, under a wide variety of conditions. A line of criticism commonly heard concerns whether Asch's findings can be generalized to situations in the real world. In other words, does a subject's answer in a laboratory about the length of some lines really have very much to do with conforming behavior in life? This is a valid criticism to make for all research about human behavior that is carried out in a controlled laboratory setting. What this criticism says is, "Well, maybe the subjects were willing to go along with the group on something so trivial and unimportant as the length of a line, but in real life, and on important matters, they would not conform so readily." It must be pointed out, however, that although real-life matters of conformity can certainly be more meaningful, it is equally likely that the pressures for conformity from groups in the real world are also proportionately stronger.

RECENT APPLICATIONS

An article examining why young adults continue to engage in unsafe sexual practices demonstrates how Asch's work continues to influence research on important social issues (Cerwonka, Isbell, & Hansen, 2000). The researchers assessed nearly 400 students between the ages of 18 and 29 on various measures of their HIV / AIDS knowledge risk behaviors (such as failure to use condoms, multiple sex partners, alcohol and other drug use, and sexual history). Numerous factors were shown to predict high-risk sexual behaviors, including *conformity to peer group pressures*. You can see how an understanding of how conformity pressures affect people's choice about their sexual behaviors might be a valuable tool in fighting the continuing spread of HIV.

Another fascinating study incorporated Asch's 1955 article to examine why men are less likely than women to seek help, even when they are in dire need of it (Mansfield et al., 2003). This article begins with the following (old) joke: "Why did Moses spend 40 years wandering in the desert? Because he wouldn't ask for directions" (p. 93). This joke is funny because it taps into a stereotype about men and help-seeking. Of course, failure to ask for directions *usually* does not cause serious problems, but men also tend to resist seeking medical and mental health care, and that can be dangerous or even fatal. The authors suggest that one of the primary forces preventing men from seeking help is conformity. "In the context of help seeking, men may be disinclined

to seek help if they believe they will be stigmatized for doing so If a man greatly admires the people in his life who discourage or speak badly of seeking help, he will be less likely to seek help himself (p. 101).

On a final note, culture appears to play an especially important role in conformity (Bond & Smith, 1996). Research in collectivist countries, such as Japan or India, has consistently found higher levels of conformity than in individualistic countries, such as the United States. Such findings add to the ever-growing body of evidence that psychological research must never overlook the impact of culture on virtually all human behaviors.

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