

Conformity and Asch's Experiment

Conformity

Conformity – involves a change of behaviour or opinion in order to fit in with a group.

What is it?

- When people “go along” with the majority/minority opinion or behaviour.
- Conformity involves social influence

Why People Conform?

Compliance [ASCH] Conform to the group norm to avoid punishment.

Normative [ASCH] Peer pressure, Scared of rejection.

Informational [SHERIF] Looking at others for guidance, unsure of what to say.

Ingratiation Conforming to gain acceptance and to impress

Experimentation: ASCH (1951)

Aim:

To see if participants would yield (conform) to majority social influence and give incorrect answers in a situation where the correct answers were always obvious.

Procedure:

1. Seven male, student participants looked at two cards: the test card showed one vertical line; the other card showed three vertical lines of different length.
2. The participants' task was to call out, in turn, which of the three lines was the same length as the test line. The correct answer was always obvious.
3. All participants, except one, were accomplices of the experimenter. The genuine participant called out his answer last but one.
4. Accomplices gave unanimous wrong answers on 12 of the 18 trials. These 12 trials were called the critical trials.

5. In total, Asch used 50 male college students as naïve, genuine participants in this first study.

Results

- Participants conformed to the unanimous incorrect answer on 32% of the critical trials.
- 74% of participants conformed at least once
- 26% of participants never conformed. Some of these "independent" participants were confident in their judgements. More often, however, they experienced tension and doubt but managed to resist the pressure exerted by the unanimous majority
- During post-experimental debriefing, some conforming participants claimed to have actually seen the line identified by the majority as the correct answer. Others yielded because they could not bear to be in a minority of one and risk being ridiculed or excluded by the group. Most participants, who had conformed, however, experienced a distortion of judgement: they thought that their perception of the lines must be inaccurate and for that reason they yielded to the majority view.

Conclusions

1. Even in unambiguous situations, there may be strong group pressure to conform, especially if the group is a unanimous majority
2. However, after interviewing his participants, Asch concluded that people go along with the views of others for different reasons. Some people experience normative social influence and feel compelled to accept the mistaken majority's norms or standards of behaviour to avoid being rejected. Others experience informational pressures and doubt their own judgements - "Surely they can't all be wrong!"

Criticisms:

- All the participants were male college students and so a very limited sample
- The time and place when the research was carried out might have affected the findings. In the 1950s the USA was very conservative, involved in an anticommunist witchhunt against anyone who was thought to hold left-wing views and its educational institutions were more hierarchical than they are today