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Psychology

For A-level Year 1 and AS

1
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Jean-Marc Lawton
Eleanor Willard

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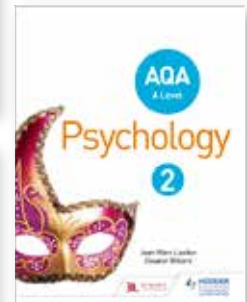
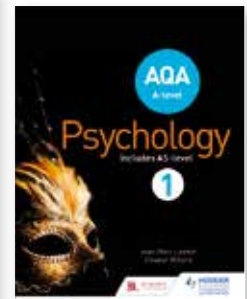
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Social influences

Introduction

Social psychology studies how people's thoughts, feelings and behaviour are affected by the presence of others. Focus can either be upon how others affect an individual or upon group interactions. The social psychology topic looked at here is that of social influence: how individuals affect and are affected by others. One of the areas of social influence is focused upon:

- **Majority influence** – (types of conformity, explanations for conformity, variables affecting conformity and conformity to social roles).

Understanding the specification

- *Internalisation, identification and compliance* are types of conformity students must have knowledge of as they are referred to directly in the specification and so could be included explicitly in the wording of examination questions.
- *Informational and normative social influences* are also referred to directly as *explanations of conformity* and so again could feature in examination questions.
- Knowledge of *conformity to social roles* is additionally required, including the *research of Zimbardo* into this area.

These are the basic requirements to ensure all examination questions can be answered. However, other relevant material is included to provide depth and detail to your understanding and to help maximise marks gained in your examinations.

1.1 Types of conformity

CONFORMITY (majority influence)

'We are half ruined by conformity, but we would be wholly ruined without it'

Charles Dudley Warner

Conformity is defined as yielding to group pressure. Conformity occurs when an individual's behaviour and/or beliefs are influenced by a larger group of people, which is why conformity is also known as **majority influence**. When conformity reduces a person's independence and leads to harmful outcomes it can be a negative force. Generally though, conformity has positive outcomes, helping society to function smoothly and predictably. Much human activity is socially based, occurring in groups, so there is a need for individuals to agree in order that groups can form and operate efficiently. Conformity helps this process; indeed conformity can be seen as a flag around which group members rally.

IN THE NEWS



◀ Jean Jülich in 2007

One popular explanation for the atrocities committed by the Nazis in the Second World War, like the extermination of Jews and Gypsies, was that Germans had a personality defect that led them to unquestioningly obey and commit such horrific acts. However, the bravery of Jean and the Edelweiss Pirates in opposing the Nazis shows that blind obedience wasn't the response of all Germans; indeed there were groups of Pirates in most German cities. This goes against the dispositional explanation of obedience; that it was the internal characteristics of Germans which made them so obedient. Stanley Milgram's famous study suggested instead that it is situational factors – aspects of the environment – that leads to such behaviour. An element of normative social influence can also be seen in the hairstyle, clothing and music that the Pirates conformed to. The actions of the teenagers also highlight how social influence can be resisted. Indeed it is heartening to realise that obedience with such destructive consequences can be resisted and that we are not doomed to commit immoral acts against our free will. However, the actions of the Pirates weren't appreciated. Due to their non-conformist nature the conquering forces refused to recognise or reward their actions and it wasn't until 2005 that their actions against the Nazis were deleted as criminal acts.

In November 2011 the press reported on Jean Jülich, who had died aged 82. He was one of the last surviving Edelweiss Pirates, working-class German teenagers who resisted the Nazis during the Second World War. Distinctive by their long hair, checked shirts, Edelweiss badges and their love of jazz music, by 1944 five thousand 'pirates' were living as outlaws in bombed out cities throughout Germany.

Throughout the war, Jean and his friends, both male and female, provided food and shelter to concentration camp escapees,

fugitive Jews and German army deserters. They attacked Hitler Youth patrols, derailed ammunition trains, vandalised weapons factories and sabotaged machinery.

Jean was arrested at age fifteen, held in solitary confinement and tortured for four months. His sixteen-year-old friend, Barthel Schink, was hanged with eleven other Pirates, in public, without trial, on orders from Heinrich Himmler. Jean survived beatings, starvation and typhus in a concentration camp until freed by American troops in 1945.

ON THE WEB

Want to know more about the Edelweiss Pirates and their resistance to the Nazis' attempts to control German society? Then go to:

www.raoulwallenberg.net/saviors/others/edelweiss-pirates-story/

Kelman (1958) made reference to three types of conformity, which vary in the amount to which they affect an individual's belief system.

- 1 **Compliance** – occurs when individuals adjust their behaviour and opinions to those of a group to be accepted or avoid disapproval. Compliance therefore occurs due to a desire to fit in and involves public, but not private, acceptance of a group's behaviour and attitudes. It is a quite weak and temporary form of conformity, only shown in the presence of the group. For example, you may claim to support a certain football team, because many others of your age group do and you want to be accepted and not ridiculed by them. However, privately you may have little interest in this team, or indeed football at all.
- 2 **Identification** – occurs when individuals adjust their behaviour and opinions to those of a group, because membership of that group is desirable. This is a stronger type of conformity, involving private as well

KEY TERMS

Conformity – yielding to group pressure (also known as majority influence)

Compliance – publicly, but not privately, going along with majority influence to gain approval

Identification – public and private acceptance of majority influence in order to gain group acceptance

Internalisation – public and private acceptance of majority influence, through adoption of the majority group's belief system



▲ A religious conversion would be an example of internalisation

as public acceptance, but is generally temporary and is not maintained when individuals leave the group. For example, in the army you may adopt the behaviour and beliefs of fellow soldiers, but on leaving the army for civilian life, new behaviours and opinions will be adopted again.

- 3 **Internalisation** – (also known as ‘true conformity’) occurs when individuals genuinely adjust their behaviour and opinions to those of a group. This involves individuals being exposed to the belief systems of others and having to decide what they truly believe in. If a group's beliefs are seen as correct, it will lead to public and private acceptance of the group's behaviour and opinions, which will not be dependent on the presence of the group or group membership for maintenance. For example, if you are influenced by a group's religious beliefs so that you truly convert to that faith, then your new religious way of life will continue without the presence or influence of the group. (Internalisation can also occur through minority influence, see page xxx.)

STRENGTHEN YOUR LEARNING

- 1 What is meant by conformity (majority influence)?
- 2 What type of conformity involves public, but not private, acceptance of a group's behaviour and attitudes?
- 3 What type of conformity involves an individual truly converting to the belief system of others?
- 4 Why does compliance occur?
- 5 What type of conformity is maintained without the presence or influence of the majority influence?
- 6 What type of conformity occurs because membership of the group is seen as desirable?
- 7 Why is identification seen as a stronger form of conformity than compliance, but a weaker form than internalisation?
- 8 Give one real life example of your own of:
 - (i) compliance
 - (ii) identification
 - (iii) internalisation.

1.2 Explanations for conformity

KEY TERMS

Informational social influence – a motivational force to look to others for guidance in order to be correct

Normative social influence – a motivational force to be liked and accepted by a group

Cognitive dissonance – an unpleasant feeling of anxiety created by simultaneously holding two contradictory ideas

Explanations of conformity are an identification of the reasons why people conform. Deutsch and Gerard (1955) distinguished between **informational social influence** (ISI) and **normative social influence** (NSI). This distinction, they believed, was crucial to understanding majority group influence.

Informational social influence (ISI)

Humans have a basic need to feel confident that their ideas and beliefs are correct (a need for certainty). This helps people feel in charge of their lives and in control of the world. This is the motivation underpinning ISI. When individuals are uncertain about something, they look at the behaviour and opinions of others and this helps shape their own thoughts and behaviour.



▲ Which to use? We have a better idea when we examine the behaviour of others

This generally occurs in unfamiliar situations, like knowing which cutlery to use when in a restaurant for the first time, or in ambiguous situations where there is no clear correct answer, like watching a film and not knowing what to make of it. Watching others to see which cutlery they use, or asking what they thought of a film, helps a person make up their own mind. When people conform because of ISI, they tend to believe the opinions adopted. As they are uncertain what to believe, they look to the opinions of others and become 'converted' to their viewpoint.

For example, Jenness (1932) (see Classic research, page xxx) gave participants a task with no clear answer: estimating how many jellybeans were in a jar. He found that individual estimates moved towards the estimates of others, showing that they genuinely (privately) believed these estimates, demonstrating an example of internalisation (true conformity).

ISI can be seen to have an evolutionary basis to it, as looking to others for guidance in new situations that are potentially dangerous could have a survival value.

Abrams *et al.* (1990) thinks that we are only influenced by others' opinions in ambiguous situations when we see ourselves as sharing characteristics with them. Thus we are much more likely to internalise the opinions of friends than strangers.

Normative social influence

Individuals want others to like and respect them and not reject or ridicule them. This is the motivation underpinning NSI; the need to be accepted by others and the best way of gaining the acceptance of others is to agree with them. However, this does not necessarily mean that we truly agree with them.

For example, Asch (1955) (see Classic research, page xxx) got participants to conform to answers given by others that were obviously incorrect. If the participants gave the correct answers, they risked being ridiculed by the majority. A conflict had been created between an individual's opinion and that of the group. In the post-experimental debriefing, many said 'I didn't want to look stupid' or 'I didn't want to be the odd one out'. So they compromised, with what they *said* (publicly) and what they *believed* (privately) being completely different, demonstrating an example of *compliance*. Jenness's participants did not face this conflict, as in his study there was no obviously correct answer.

However, conflict is only experienced when individuals disagree with others whom they see as similar to themselves in some relevant way (as in ISI: see Abrams *et al.*, 1990).



▲ Normative social influence occurs because of a need to be accepted

INCREASE YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Cognitive dissonance

When individuals have two simultaneous contradictory ideas (cognitions), an unpleasant feeling occurs, known as **cognitive dissonance**. Festinger (1957) suggested that altering these cognitions will reduce cognitive dissonance and this is best achieved through conforming. The fact that some examples of conformity cannot be explained by normative or informational social influence, but only by cognitive dissonance, supports this explanation. For example, Bogdonoff *et al.* (1961) found the conflict created by participants performing an Asch-type procedure increased their stress levels (due to participants having opinions that went against those of the majority), but this was reduced by conforming. This also illustrates how conformity can be seen as a healthy response, as it reduces stress levels.

CLASSIC RESEARCH

The role of discussion in changing opinion regarding a matter of fact – Arthur Jenness, 1932

Originally conducted as an investigation into social facilitation (the effect of the presence of others on performance), Jenness's research is now regarded as a ground-breaking study into informational social influence.



The original focus was on how group discussion influenced accuracy of judgement, but the most interesting result concerned how majority influence caused individual judgements to converge (move together). The task Jenness gave his participants, estimating the number of jellybeans in a jar, had no obvious answer; it was difficult to assess the amount. Therefore the conformity produced was motivated by informational social influence, where individuals in uncertain situations look to others for guidance on how to behave.

Aim

To investigate the effect of discussion in groups on the accuracy of individual judgements of the number of jellybeans in a jar.

Procedure

- Participants made individual, private estimates of the number of jellybeans in a jar.
- Participants then discussed their estimates, either in a large group or in several smaller groups, discovering in the process that individuals differed widely in their estimates.
- After discussion, group estimates were created.
- Participants then made a second individual, private estimate.

Findings

- 1 'Typicality of opinion was increased' – individuals' second private estimates tended to converge (move towards) their group estimate.
- 2 'The average change of opinion was greater among females' – women conformed more.

Conclusions

The judgements of individuals are affected by majority opinions, especially in ambiguous or unfamiliar situations. Discussion is not effective in changing opinion unless the individuals who enter into discussion become aware that the opinions of others are different to theirs.

Evaluation

- Unlike many other social influence studies, there was no element of deceit, so the research can be seen as ethically sound.
- This was a laboratory-based experiment using an artificial, unusual situation. It therefore lacks mundane realism, as it is not an everyday event to be asked how many sweets there are in a jar and so does not reflect actual behaviour in real-life situations.
- The study tells us little, if anything, about majority influence in non-ambiguous situations where people conform to obviously wrong answers (see Asch, 1955).
- Jenness's study may involve NSI as well as ISI. After making initial individual estimates, participants then created group estimates. Therefore their later second individual estimates may have moved towards their group estimates due to a desire for acceptance (NSI) as well as/or a desire to be correct (ISI).

YOU ARE THE RESEARCHER

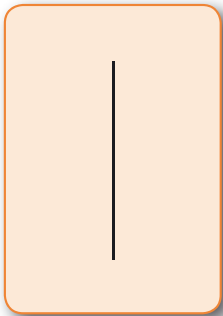
Design a modification of Jenness's study that uses a different conformity task. For example how could you use a library to conduct the study? Or your local swimming pool? Or indeed a car filled with balloons? Try and think of an example of your own. What would be your IV and DV? Write a suitable directional (one-tailed) and null hypothesis. Create some appropriate standardised instructions.

► How could balloons in a car be used to study informational social influence?

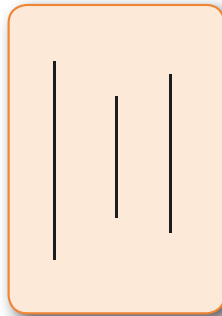


CLASSIC RESEARCH

Opinions and social pressure – Solomon Asch, 1955



Standard card



Comparison card

Solomon Asch, a Polish immigrant to the USA, transformed the study of social influence with his pioneering research at Harvard University. He also taught Stanley Milgram, who achieved later fame with his studies of obedience.

Asch was interested in testing conformity to obviously incorrect answers. He criticised research like Jenness's that only involved ambiguous tasks and uncertain situations. Beginning in 1951 Asch conducted a series of experiments, adding and publishing new data as he progressed.

Aim

To investigate the degree to which individuals would conform to a majority who gave obviously wrong answers.

Procedure

A group of 123 American male student volunteers took part in what they were told was a study of visual perception. Individual participants were placed in groups with between seven to nine others, sat either in a line or around a table, who in reality were pseudo-participants (confederates). The task was to say which comparison line, A, B or C, was the same as a stimulus line on 18 different trials. Of these, 12 were 'critical' trials where pseudo-participants gave identical wrong answers, the real participant always answering last or last but one.

There was also a control group of 36 participants who were tested individually on 20 trials to examine how accurate individual judgements were.

Findings

- The control group had an error rate of only 0.04 per cent (3 mistakes out of 720 trials), which shows how obvious the correct answers were.
- On the 12 critical trials there was a 32 per cent conformity rate to wrong answers.
- 75 per cent of participants conformed to at least one wrong answer (meaning also that 25 per cent never conformed).
- 5 per cent of participants conformed to all 12 wrong answers.

Post-experiment interviews with participants found three reasons for conformity:

- 1 **Distortion of action** – where the majority of participants who conformed did so publicly, but not privately, as they wished to avoid ridicule.
- 2 **Distortion of perception** – where some participants believed their perception must actually be wrong and so conformed.
- 3 **Distortion of judgement** – where some participants had doubts concerning the accuracy of their judgements and so conformed to the majority view.

Conclusions

The judgements of individuals are affected by majority opinions, even when the majority are obviously wrong.

There are big individual differences in the amount to which people are affected by majority influence. As most participants conformed publicly, but not privately, it suggests that they were motivated by normative social influence, where individuals conform to gain acceptance or avoid rejection by a group.

ON THE WEB

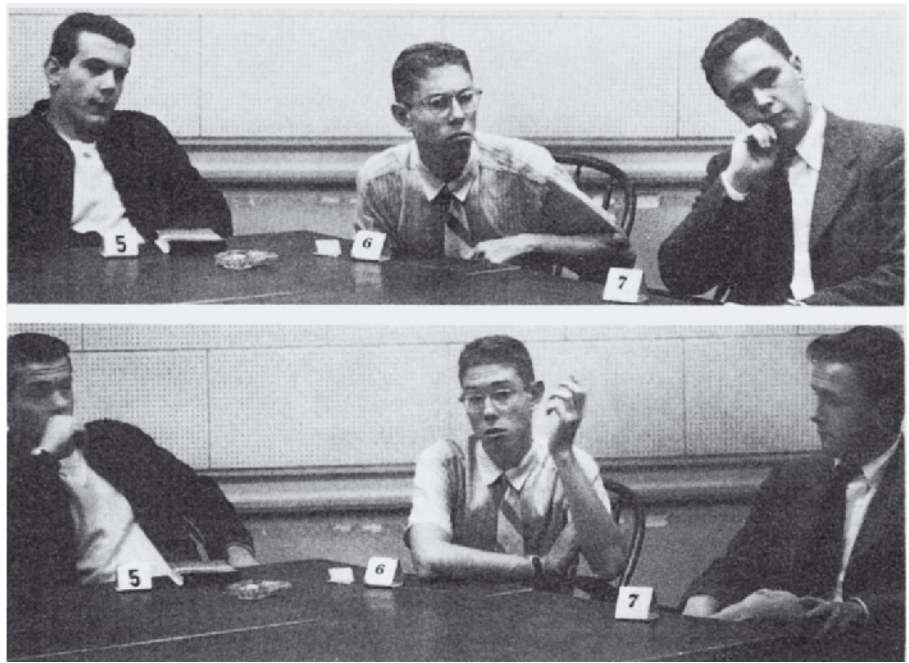
Listen to a BBC Radio 4 programme about Asch's pioneering research into conformity, first broadcast on 9 December 2003, as part of the 'Mind Changers' series:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00f8mzr>

Two videos of the Asch procedure can be seen at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NyDDyT1lDhA>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qA-gbpt7Ts8>



▲ A minority of one faces a unanimous majority in Asch's study

Evaluation**Evaluation**

- Asch's method for studying conformity became a **paradigm**, the accepted way of conducting conformity research.
- As only one real participant is tested at a time, the procedure is uneconomical and time-consuming. Crutchfield (1954) performed similar research, but improved on the procedure by testing several participants at once.
- The situation was unrealistic and so lacked mundane realism. It would be unusual to disagree so much with others as to what was the 'correct' answer in a situation.
- Asch's study was unethical, as it involved deceit. Participants believed it was a study of visual perception. It also involved psychological harm, with participants put under stress through disagreeing with others (see Bogdonoff *et al.* (1961), page xxx).
- As the overall conformity rate on the critical trials was only 32 per cent (one-third of the participants), the majority of people are actually not conformist, but independent (see page xxx).

CLASSIC RESEARCH

'Asch without the actors' – Kazuo Mori and Miho Arai (2010)

Asch's study may well have become a paradigm study, but a major criticism was that of demand characteristics; the confederates were not trained actors and therefore participants may have realised that the confederates' answers were not real and so just pretended to conform, because that is what they thought the researcher wanted them to do. Mori and Arai's solution was the MORI technique (Manipulation of Overlapping Rivalrous Images by polarising filters). Participants wore filter glasses, allowing them to watch the same film, but see different things. One participant in each group wore different glasses, thus perceiving a different comparison line to match to the stimulus line. Asch's study also only used males, while this study additionally used females.

Aim

To reproduce the Asch experiment, but without a need for confederates.

Procedure

A group of 104 Japanese undergraduates (40 males and 64 females) were placed into same-sex groups of four. Participants sat around a table, with seat order randomised, and were asked to say aloud, which of three comparison lines matched a stimulus line. The same comparison and stimulus lines were used as in Asch's study.

Participants were asked to wear sunglasses, allegedly to protect their eyes from glare, with the third participant in each group wearing different glasses, actually to make them see a shorter or longer comparison line to the other three participants on twelve out of eighteen 'critical' trials. The other six trials were neutral, where participants all saw the same thing.

After the line judgement tasks were completed, participants answered a questionnaire containing 22 questions taken from the interview Asch used with his participants. Among the questions were ones asking whether participants had any suspicions about the images seen, whether they had noticed the presence of others who answered differently, whether they had been sure of their answers and whether they had been influenced by the answers of others if not confident of their own judgements.

Findings

The 78 majority participants who saw the correct sized comparison lines answered incorrectly 8.2 per cent of the time (77 out of 936 tasks), with no significant gender differences.

The 26 minority participants who saw the different sized comparison lines answered incorrectly 19.6 per cent of the time (61 out of 312 tasks). However, female minority participants answered incorrectly 28.6 per cent of the time, while for males it was only 5 per cent of the time.

With females the results were similar to Asch's, with the minority conforming to wrong answers on the twelve critical trials an average 4.41 times (3.44 times in Asch's study), but male conformity was not noticeable. This is noteworthy because all participants in the Asch study were male.

Conclusions

As all minority participants noticed their judgements were different, but none reported any suspicions concerning the honesty of majority participants' answers, it suggests demand characteristics did not occur.

As contrary to Asch's findings, the frequency of conformity of minority participants was very similar regardless of whether the majority answered unanimously or not, it suggests the number of people in a majority group has little effect on conformity levels (see Asch's variations, page xxx).

The fact that women tended to conform more readily than men may be due to cultural differences, as all participants were Japanese, and/or generational changes in the 55 years since Asch's study.

Another reason could be that participants knew each other, unlike in Asch's study. Mori and Arai argue this is more externally valid, as in real life conformity tends to occur among acquainted people, such as family members, rather than in Asch-type scenarios where decisions are made among strangers.

As no majority participants laughed at the performance of minority participants, conformity cannot have occurred due to fear of ridicule.

ON THE WEB

You can read the full research paper of Mori and Arai's conformity study at:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/psych.2013.411127>

Evaluation

- This new version of Asch's procedure could provide an effective means of examining conformity, especially in natural settings and in various social situations, such as with children, where the use of confederates would not be practical.
- The new technique is still unethical though, as participants were deceived into thinking the sunglasses were worn to prevent glare.
- It could be argued that conformity occurred due to both normative social influence (a desire to be accepted) and informational social influence (a desire to be correct).
- Both Asch and Mori and Arai's studies lack mundane realism, as comparing line sizes is not something that is often done in real life.

RESEARCH IN FOCUS

- 1 Studies of conformity tend to be laboratory experiments. Give one advantage and one disadvantage of this method.
- 2 What experimental design was used in Jenness's study? Give one advantage and one disadvantage of this design
- 3 What are the independent variable (IV) and dependent variable (DV) in Jenness, Asch and Mori and Arai's studies?
- 4 Mori and Arai's study is to some extent a replication of Asch's paradigm. What is a replication and why would it be performed?
- 5 In what way can Asch and Mori and Arai's studies be considered unethical? How would these ethical issues be addressed?
- 6 Mori and Arai's study was designed to reduce demand characteristics. What are demand characteristics and how did their study attempt to reduce them?

PSYCHOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

One way in which knowledge of conformity can be used in a practical manner is in the formation of groups, for example sports teams. By giving potential members ambiguous tasks, where there is no clear correct answer, individuals will be drawn together through informational social influence into creating a group identity and this would involve identification (and maybe even internalisation). As a result, it would create a stronger group bond than that done through compliance as compliance would be achieved by simply creating normative social influence through getting new members to conform to group norms.



▲ Better group cohesion can be achieved through informational social influence

STRENGTHEN YOUR LEARNING

- 1 In what way does normative social influence differ from informational social influence?
- 2 What type of conformity is associated with normative social influence?
- 3 What type of conformity is associated with informational social influence?
- 4 Can you think of real-life examples of your own of informational social influence and normative social influence?
- 5 What aspect of Jenness's study involves informational social influence?
- 6 What aspect of Asch's study involves normative social influence?
- 7 What is cognitive dissonance? How can it be used as an explanation of conformity?

1.3 Variables affecting conformity

KEY TERMS

Situational variables – features of an environment that affect the degree to which individuals yield to group pressures

Individual variables – personal characteristics that affect the degree to which individuals yield to group pressures

Research into majority influence has identified several **situational variables**, qualities of an environment that influence levels of conformity, which have an influence over the degree to which individuals conform. These include group size (the number of members within a social group), unanimity (to what degree the group members are in agreement with each other) and task difficulty (how obvious the correct answer/decision is when regarding a task). Asch performed several variations of his procedure that investigated these factors.

Situational variables

Size of group

Research indicates that conformity rates increase as the size of a majority influence increases, but there comes a point where further increases in the size of the majority does not lead to further increases in conformity.

Asch (1956) found with one real participant and one confederate conformity was low, rising to 13 per cent with two confederates and 32 per cent with three confederates (around the same rate as in his original study). Adding extra confederates (up to fifteen confederates) had no further effect on the overall conformity rate. Bond and Smith (1996) supported this idea by performing a meta-analysis of 133 Asch-type studies from seventeen countries and finding that conformity peaks with about four or five confederates. Gerard *et al.* (1968) however questioned this, finding conformity rates do rise as more confederates are added, though the rate of increase declines with each additional confederate. Pike and Laland (2010) gave support to Gerard by reporting that sticklebacks demonstrated conformity to feeding behaviour by showing an increased level of copying of demonstrator fish eating at a food-rich site, but that the rate of conformity increase declined as the number of demonstrator fish increased. This additionally suggests an evolutionary basis to conformity due to its survival value.



▲ Even sticklebacks show conformist behaviour

Unanimity

Conformity rates have been found to decline when majority influence is not unanimous. The important factor though would seem to be the reduction in the majority's agreement, rather than an individual being given support for their opinions, as conformity drops if a rebel goes against the majority, but does not support the individual's viewpoint.

Asch (1956) found if there was one confederate who went against the others, conformity dropped from around 32 per cent to 5.5 per cent, but if the 'rebel' went against both the other confederates and the real participant, conformity still dropped to 9 per cent.

Task difficulty

Greater conformity rates are seen when task difficulty increases, as the correct answer becomes less obvious. This means that individuals will look to others more for guidance as to what the correct response is, suggesting that ISI is the dominant force.

Asch (1956) increased task difficulty by making the comparison lines similar to each other, finding that when he did so participants were increasingly likely to conform to wrong answers, demonstrating the effect of task difficulty on conformity.

INCREASE YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Research has focused upon other situational variables, but has also identified several important individual factors – qualities of an individual that influence their level of conformity – such as their gender. These variables, both situational and individual, can interact at any given time to determine the degree to which a person will conform.

Other situational variables

Group identity

Conformity is seen to be stronger with in-group membership, where individuals hold positive attitudes towards the members of a group. Indeed, group size and those who rebel against a majority have little influence if they are 'out-group' members. However, with groups of friends there may be less pressure to conform through normative social influence as friends already know and accept each other (see Mori and Arai (2010), page xxx). With ISI, Abrams *et al.* (1990) thinks that individuals are only influenced by others' opinions in ambiguous situations when they see themselves as sharing characteristics with them and are thus more likely to internalise the opinions of friends than strangers.

David and Turner (1996) found that exposing Australian students to both majority and minority out-group influence only resulted in them adopting a more conformist attitude to in-group influences, which suggests that in-groups exert a powerful conformist influence.

Private and public answers

When individuals have made a public commitment to a viewpoint, conformity to majorities who express a different viewpoint appears to be weak. Conformity is also weaker

when individuals are allowed to give private rather than public judgements.

Deutsch and Gerard (1955) used an Asch-type procedure to find that when participants made no public prior commitment to an answer, 24.7 per cent conformed with an incorrect majority, compared to only 5.7 per cent when making their initial judgement known before hearing the incorrect judgment of the group. Asch (1956) also found that if participants wrote down answers rather than saying them aloud, conformity declined to 12.5 per cent. Both studies therefore suggest that fear of ridicule and disapproval are important factors.

Social norms

Social norms are society's unwritten rules; ways in which individuals are expected to behave in different situations. Social norms are learned via the process of socialisation (the passing on of attitudes, values and beliefs from one generation to another). This means that conformity to majority influence can occur even when an individual is alone, as they will tend to behave in the way expected of them, for example not dropping litter (see Zimbardo, Conformity to social roles, page xxx).

Individual variables

Gender

Research suggests that females conform more readily, possibly because females are socialised into more submissive roles and so greater conformity is expected of them due to their perceived lower status. Eagly *et al.* (1981) believes that females focus more on the quality of relationships with others and take greater responsibility for

creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships, thus leading them to conform more. If true, this would involve NSI more than ISI, due to a need for acceptance. Eagly also argues that male gender roles demand that they remain independent and so do not conform readily with others in order to achieve this. An evolutionary basis to gender roles and conformity may also exist, through natural selection acting upon women to be more nurturing and cooperative, and upon men to be more aggressive and confrontational. Maslach *et al.* (1987) found that males tend to be more independent and assertive and therefore conform less. Females however, are sensitive to others' needs and emotions and so conform to maintain harmony. These differences in gender roles can therefore explain the varying levels of conformity found between the sexes. Jenness (1932) (see Classic study, page xxx) found that females conformed more. Perhaps this occurred as the research task was more male orientated, making females less sure of their judgements, thus creating more informational social influence for females than males. Sistrunk and McDavid (1971) supported this view by finding that when tasks had a male bias, such as involving cars rather than cooking, females felt more uncertain and conformed more.

Mood

Research suggests that humans will conform more when they are in a good mood, perhaps because they are then more amenable to agreeing with others. Research has also indicated that people will conform more readily when moving from a fearful to a more relaxed mood.

Tong *et al.* (2008) found that participants were more likely to conform to wrong answers to maths questions given by confederates, when in a positive rather than neutral or negative mood, illustrating the effect mood can have on conformity levels.

Dolinski (1998) found evidence for a fear-then-relief phenomenon in both field and laboratory settings. Abrupt relief of anxiety states led to participants conforming more readily, again showing how mood states can affect conformity.

Personality

Several aspects of personality have been suggested as having an effect on conformity rates. People with low self-esteem will have a greater need for social approval and so will conform more to feel better about themselves and boost their levels of confidence. Adorno (1950) proposed the existence of an authoritarian personality type who would categorise people into 'us' and 'them' groups and who would conform very readily to in-group members, especially those of higher status. (See The dispositional explanation for obedience, page xxx.)

Jugert (2009) found that individuals with a high need for personal structure, characterised by a preference for orderliness and a discomfort of ambiguity and unpredictability, were more likely to have tendencies towards conformity, supporting the idea of personality being linked to conformity.

Furman and Duke (1988) found non-music students changed a stated preference concerning pop music to that of three confederates who had a different preference, while music students did not change their preference. This suggests that personality in the form of individual differences in levels of self-confidence can affect conformity levels.

Culture

People from different cultures have been shown to conform to different levels, possibly because some cultures are more uniform in their structure, have shared values among their members and thus find it easier to agree with each other. Cultures can also be divided into collectivist ones, where conformity to social norms is more socialised and expected, and individualist cultures that tolerate and encourage more deviance from social norms.



▲ Norwegians are very conformist as they share cultural values and norms

Smith and Bond (1993) found an average conformity rate among collectivist cultures of 25 to 58 per cent, while in individualist cultures it ranged from 14 to 39 per cent, which suggests culture does affect conformity.

Milgram (1961) found 62 per cent of Norwegian participants conformed to obviously wrong answers concerning the length of acoustic tones. Avant and Knudson (1993) argue that this is because Norway has few ethnic minorities and is a very cohesive country that appreciates and promotes traditional values and frowns upon individualism.

Perrin and Spencer (1980), using the Asch paradigm, found a conformity level of only 0.25 per cent among Yorkshire science students, which suggests Britons have very low conformity levels, though a different explanation might be that science students are taught to question things and be independent thinkers. Indeed the same researchers found a similar conformity rate to Asch's in young British criminals, who could be said to lack independent thought.

YOU ARE THE RESEARCHER

Psychology is centred on the design and execution of practical research. Can you design a simple study to compare the level of conformity in PE students with science students? What would the independent variable (IV) be? What experimental design would you use? You will need a measure of conformity to form your dependent variable (DV).



▲ Who conforms more?

RESEARCH IN FOCUS

- 1 Bond and Smith (1996) performed a meta-analysis of Asch-type studies. What is a meta-analysis?
- 2 Bond and Smith found a positive correlation between conformity rates and the size of the majority influence. Explain how a positive correlation differs from a negative correlation.
- 3 Give one strength and one weakness of correlations.
- 4 What kind of graph would correlational data be plotted on?
- 5 Asch's variations, performed to identify important variables involved in conformity, involved the use of controlled conditions. What are controlled conditions and why are they used in experiments?

PSYCHOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

Advertisers often use knowledge of conformity to increase sales. One useful technique is the 'bandwagon effect', which focuses on the ideas that individuals decide what to buy based on what their peers recommend, due to a need to 'fit in'. If you feel everyone in a desirable social group has a product, such as a certain type of phone, then buying that type of phone will make you feel that you will be accepted into that group. Supporting evidence for this form of NSI comes from a Neilson Company study (2009) that surveyed 25,000 people from 50 countries and found 90 per cent trusted their peers' opinions of products, significantly more than the 69 per cent who trusted media recommendations.

► Individuals are heavily influenced by what peers think of products – advertisers use this as a form of NSI to get us to buy things



STRENGTHEN YOUR LEARNING

- 1 In relation to conformity, what are:
 - (i) individual variables
 - (ii) situational variables?
- 2 Does increasing the size of a group always lead to greater conformity? Explain your answer.
- 3 What happens to conformity rates when majority influence is not unanimous? What is the important factor here?
- 4 Why does conformity increase as task difficulty increases?
- 5 Why is conformity stronger when individuals identify with members of a group?
- 6 How might giving public and private answers affect conformity rates?
- 7 Can social norms affect conformity?
- 8 Do females or males conform more? Explain your answer.
- 9 How can mood affect conformity levels?
- 10 Which aspects of personality have been linked to high levels of conformity? Explain why this might be so.
- 11 Explain why people from different cultures conform to different levels.

KEY TERMS

Social roles – the parts individuals play as members of a social group, which meet the expectations of that situation

1.4 Conformity to social roles

Each social situation has its own social norms – expected ways for individuals to behave – which will vary from situation to situation, for example, joining the back of a queue when arriving at a bus stop. Individuals learn how to behave by looking at the **social roles** other people play in such situations and then conforming to them. These learned social roles become like ‘internal mental scripts’, allowing individuals to behave appropriately in different settings.

Conformity to social roles therefore involves *identification*, which is stronger than compliance, involving both public and private acceptance of the behaviour and attitudes exhibited.

Conformity to social roles is not as strong as internalisation though, as individuals adopt different social roles for different social situations and only conform to particular roles while in those particular social situations. With each social role adopted, behaviour changes to fit the social norms of that situation, so as an individual moves to another social situation, their behaviour will change to suit the new social norms, played out through a different social role.

Conformity to social roles is therefore a useful way of understanding and predicting social behaviour, which brings a reassuring sense of order to our social interactions.

Philip Zimbardo’s 1973 prison simulation study perfectly illustrates the role of social roles in conformity.

CLASSIC RESEARCH

Stanford prison experiment – Craig Haney, Curtis Banks and Philip Zimbardo (1971)



▲ Zimbardo's study showed how people conform readily to social roles

Zimbardo's study was an attempt to understand the brutal and dehumanising behaviour found in prisons and reported on a regular basis in the American media. Two widely differing explanations were to be explored. First, the dispositional hypothesis that the violence and degradation of prisons was due to the 'nature' of the people found within the prison system. Basically that both guards and prisoners were 'bad seeds' possessed of sadistic, aggressive characteristics, which naturally led to endless brutality. Second, there was the situational hypothesis that saw violence and degradation as a product of 'the prison soil', the interactions between environmental factors that supported such behaviour. In essence, that the brutalising and dehumanising conditions of prison led to the brutal behaviour of all concerned.

To separate the effects of the prison environment from those within the prison system, Zimbardo built a 'mock prison' that used 'average' people with no record of violence or criminality to play both prisoners and guards, roles that were determined purely randomly. If no brutality occurred, the dispositional hypothesis would be supported, but if brutality was seen then it must be situational factors that were driving normal, law abiding people to such behaviour.

Aims

- To investigate the extent to which people would conform to the roles of guard and prisoner in a role-playing simulation of prison life.
- To test the *dispositional* versus *situational* hypotheses that saw prison violence as either due to the sadistic personalities of guards and prisoners or the brutal conditions of the prison environment.

Method

A total of 75 male university students responded to a newspaper advertisement asking for volunteers for a study of prison life paying \$15 a day. Of these, 21 students rated as the most physically and mentally stable, mature and free from antisocial, criminal tendencies were used (ten as guards and eleven as prisoners). While all the students initially expressed a desire to be prisoners, selection as to who would be guards

and who would be prisoners was on a random basis. Zimbardo himself played the role of the prison 'superintendent'.

The basement of the psychology department at Stanford University was converted into a 'mock prison' and the experience was made as realistic as possible, with the prisoners being arrested by the real local police and then fingerprinted, stripped and deloused. Dehumanisation (the removal of individual identity) was increased by prisoners wearing numbered smocks, nylon stocking caps (to simulate shaved heads) and a chain around one ankle. Guards wore khaki uniforms, reflective sunglasses (to prevent eye contact) and were issued with handcuffs, keys and truncheons (though physical punishment was not permitted).

Nine prisoners were placed three to a cell and a regular routine of shifts and meal times etc., was established, as well as visiting times, a parole and disciplinary board and a prison chaplain. The study was planned to run for two weeks.

Findings

Both guards and prisoners settled quickly into their social roles. After an initial prisoner 'rebellion' was crushed, dehumanisation was increasingly apparent, with the guards becoming ever more sadistic, taunting the prisoners and giving them meaningless, boring tasks to do. The prisoners, meanwhile, became submissive and unquestioning of the guards' behaviour. Some prisoners sided with the guards against any prisoners who dared to protest. Deindividuation was noticeable by the prisoners referring to each other and themselves by their prison numbers instead of their names.

After 36 hours one prisoner was released because of fits of crying and rage. Three more prisoners developed similar symptoms and were released on successive days. A fifth prisoner developed a severe rash when his parole was 'denied'.

Scheduled to run for fourteen days, the study was stopped after six days when Zimbardo realised the extent of the harm that was occurring and the increasingly aggressive nature of the guards' behaviour.

In later interviews both guards and prisoners said they were surprised at the uncharacteristic behaviours they had shown.

Conclusions

The situational hypothesis is favoured over the dispositional hypothesis, as none of the participants had ever shown such character traits or behaviour before the study. It was the environment of the mock prison and the social roles it demanded the participants play that led to their uncharacteristic behaviour.

Individuals conform readily to the social roles demanded of a situation, even when such roles override an individual's moral beliefs about their personal behaviour.

Both guards and prisoners demonstrated social roles gained from media sources (e.g. prison films) and learned models of social power (e.g. parent-child, teacher-student).

Evaluation

Evaluation

- Individual differences are important, as not all guards behaved brutally. Some were hard, but fair, some brutal, while others rarely exerted control over the prisoners. Nor was prisoner behaviour identical.
- Zimbardo hoped his research would lead to beneficial reforms within the prison system. Beneficial reforms in the way prisoners were treated, especially juveniles, did initially occur. However, Zimbardo regards his study as a failure in the sense that prison conditions in the USA are now even worse than when he performed his study.

RESEARCH IN FOCUS

- 1 Zimbardo used a self-selected sample.
 - (i) Explain how this was achieved.
 - (ii) Give one strength and one weakness of self-selected sampling.
- 2 In Zimbardo's study, guards and prisoners were selected by random sampling.
 - (i) What is random sampling?
 - (ii) How would it be achieved?
 - (iii) Give one strength and one weakness of random sampling.
- 3 Zimbardo's study is not an experiment. What research method was used?
- 4 In what ways can Zimbardo's study be considered unethical? Justify your answer.

ON THE WEB

Listen to a Radio 4 programme about Zimbardo's prison simulation study, first broadcast on 28 November 2007, as part of the 'Mind Changers' series.

www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b008crhv

A 30-minute BBC TV programme about Zimbardo's prison simulation study, including interviews with participants, can be seen at:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=760lwYmpXbc

Zimbardo's study contains elements of both conformity and obedience, so take care to only use the aspects that relate to conformity to social roles when answering examination questions.

ASSESSMENT CHECK

- 1 The following statements relate to conformity:
- A Looking to the group for information as to the correct behaviour.
 - B Going along with a group because we accept their belief system as our own.
 - C Going along with a group, even though privately we do not agree with them.
 - D Conforming to group norms publicly and privately, but only temporarily, as conformity is not maintained outside the presence of the group.

Copy and complete the table below by writing which statement, A, B, C or D, describes which type of conformity. [3 marks]

Type of conformity	Statement
Compliance	
Internalisation	
Identification	

- 2 Explain what is meant by identification. Give a real life example. [3 marks]
- 3 Describe and evaluate explanations of conformity. [16 marks]
- 4 a) Outline the aims and findings of one study of conformity to social roles. [4 marks]
- b) Describe one ethical issue associated with this study. [2 marks]
- 5 Zimbardo's prison simulation study uses a participant observation study method. Give one strength and one weakness of this type of study. [2 + 2 marks]
- 6 Priti has recently moved to a new school and has found it hard to make new friends, but she has noticed that many fellow students support the local football team, Vale City. She bought a replica shirt of the team, even though she had little knowledge of or interest in football. On wearing the shirt to school, Priti soon found people being friendly to her and including her in their activities.
- a) What kind of conformity is being exhibited in the above passage? [1 mark]
- b) Refer to features of the passage to justify your answer. [3 marks]
- 7 Research studies of conformity generally involve experiments. Describe and evaluate the experimental method. [6 marks]

ASSESSMENT GUIDANCE

Question 1 is a 'choice' question where you must select from statements given to you to complete the answer. One statement will be left over.

Question 2 requires not only a description of identification, but also a real-life example to show your understanding of the term.

Question 3 is an essay question, with six marks available for the outline and ten marks for the evaluation. The use of the term 'explanations' means that more than one explanation must be covered.

The demands of Question 4a are very specific, so material on anything other than outlining aims or findings would not be creditworthy (including evaluation).

Question 4b requires identification and details of an ethical issue relevant to the study.

Question 5 concerns the methodology of Zimbardo's study, in each case one mark would be available for identifying a relevant strength and weakness and an extra mark in each case for elaboration (detail) that shows understanding.

Question 6 requires reference to be made to information in the passage to gain the marks available.

In Question 7 there are three marks available for a description and a further three marks for an evaluation of the experimental method.

SUMMARY

- Conformity involves yielding to group pressure. Kelman (1958) proposed three types of conformity: compliance, identification and internalisation, which differ in the degree to which they affect belief systems.
- Conformity is regarded as a form of majority influence, with minority influence regarded as a form of internalisation.
- One explanation for conformist behaviour is informational social influence, where individuals yield to majority influence in order to be correct. This was demonstrated in Jenness's (1932) study.
- A second explanation for conformist behaviour is normative social influence, where individuals yield to majority influence to be accepted/ avoid rejection. This was demonstrated in Asch's (1955) study.
- Another explanation of conformist behaviour is cognitive dissonance, where conformist behaviour reduces the unpleasant feelings created by simultaneously holding two contradictory cognitions.
- There are several situational variables that affect rates of conformity, such as the size of the majority influence, the unanimity of the majority influence, task difficulty, as well as group identity, whether responses are made publicly or privately, and social norms. There are also individual factors such as, gender, mood, personality and culture.
- Social roles are the parts individuals play as members of a social group, which meet the expectations of a situation.
- Zimbardo found that individuals conform readily to the social roles demanded of a situation in his prison simulation study.

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