

Outline and evaluate research into conformity

Psychology, Behaviorism



Outline and evaluate research into Conformity as an explanation of Human Social Behaviour “ Conforming” is when a person changes the way they act and think to fit in with the majority of people in a group to gain acceptance. Kelman (1958) said that there are 3 types of conformity, Compliance, which means going along with others to gain approval and avoid rejection and accepting the group view in public but not private. Identification is conforming to someone who is liked and respected and Internalisation is accepting the group’s beliefs and accepting it both publicly and privately.

However this essay will be discussing the two main theories as to why people conform, Informational Social Influence and Normative Social Influence as well as other factors that can affect as to why people conform. Informational Social influence is when an individual goes along with the majority because they believe that the majority is right and better informed than they are. Sherif (1935) conducted a study to test this theory in which he put the participants in a darkened room with a stationary point of light and asked them to say how much the light seemed to move and in what direction, with the participants giving their individual answers.

Sherif then put them into groups of three and asked them to answer again. Sherif found that the participants changed their answer to reflect the groups as they believed the group was better informed and correct, which is an example of Informational Social Influence. However Sherif used an ambiguous test, it was impossible for Sherif to measure how far the light moved, and because it was impossible to provide a ‘ correct’ answer, then it was also impossible to say for certain that the participants in the experiment had actually conformed.

Also Sherif's study lacked ecological validity as the test wouldn't occur in everyday life and so the behaviour could be artificial. The other theory as to why people conform is Normative Social influence which is when an individual complies with the group, changing their behaviour and goes along with the majority publicly to avoid rejection but privately disagrees with their view. This was evidenced in Asch's (1951) study into conformity with an unambiguous task. Asch put the participants into groups of seven, with all but one participant being confederates of the Asch. The group was shown a set of three lines and a separate reference line and the task was to judge which of the three lines was the same length as the reference line, with each set consisting of one line that was obviously the same length and two lines that were obviously different. The group gave their answers one by one with the "naive" participant answering in second to last place, and the confederates intentionally gave the wrong answers.

Asch found that 37% of the responses the participant gave were the wrong answers the confederates gave, showing the participant conformed. Asch also found that the larger the majority, the higher level of conformity although above four, the level didn't increase much and when there was a dissenter going against the group, conformity levels dropped drastically. Also when the task was made more difficult, conformity increased.

Asch's study has been criticised as being a "child of its time" as it was conducted in 1950's America where conformity was more likely to occur. Another criticism is the sample of participants were all young male students from the same university and so the results can not be generalised. The study also lacked ecological validity as judging line lengths is not an

everyday task. However what these theories do not consider is social roles. Zimbardo (1973) conducted an experiment to see what affect social roles would have on someone's behaviour.

He created a mock prison in the basement of Stanford University and recruited 24 male participants, who did not have aggressive personalities, to be "guards" and "prisoners" and informed them of what the experiment was about. To make the experience as realistic as possible Zimbardo had the prisoners "arrested" and given prisoner uniforms. The guards were given uniforms and mirrored sunglasses and had to enforce the rules of the prison. The prisoners rebelled on the first day and the guards responded by aggressively enforcing order and discipline within the prison.

They used fire extinguishers against the prisoners, locked individuals in a dark broom cupboard for hours at a time, constantly harassed them, and even played prisoners off against each other. Over time the prisoners became more and more subdued and took on the submissive role of the prisoner. The guards began to enjoy the power they had, and their use of aggression and harassment steadily increased as they took on the dominant role of prison guards.

The experiment had to be stopped early due to how dangerous and brutal it became, with three prisoners being released early due to severe psychological distress. Zimbardo concluded that the roles the participants found themselves in and the environment caused the behaviour displayed as both the guards and prisoners conformed to the behaviour they believed that role should display. Both guards and prisoners rapidly conformed, in just a few days, to the social roles that the situation placed them in.

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Zimbardo's experiment has been deeply criticised as it was very unethical and he deliberately put the participants into a situation that caused them physical and psychological harm. There are also ecological validity issues as prison officers apply to be prison officers in real life, unlike the experiment where they could be guards or prisoners, and prison officers do not work 24 hours a day, which brings the ecological validity of the experiment into question. There are also other factors we must consider which affect whether people conform. One factor is the culture in which people are brought up.

People who come from a collectivist culture are more likely to conform than someone from an individualistic culture as the collectivist culture focuses on group mentality and places the needs of the group over the needs of the individual, so a study in a highly individualistic culture like America can yield different results than conducting the same study in a highly collectivist culture such as China. Another factor is the time period the study was conducted in. The attitudes of that particular period can affect the results and may not hold true today.

Thus the study might be measuring the attitudes of that time period and conducting the same study in a different time period could bring different results. Individual differences also play a part as a person's age, their life experiences, education and gender can affect if and how much a person will conform. Recent research has suggested that women are more likely to conform than men as women are more socially orientated and thus will fear social rejection more. The group size also has an impact on conformity levels as the bigger the group is, the more pressure there is to conform.

The unanimity of the group as well, if everyone agrees on an issue then the group pressure to agree with the group is huge, but if there are dissenters among the group then the group pressure decreases and it's easier to resist conforming. The type of task is also a factor, if the task is difficult or ambiguous; people are more likely to defer to other people or a group and conform as the person believes the group has more information and is right, whereas if the task is easy and unambiguous the person is more likely to resist conforming.

Conformity is a big factor in human social behaviour as every human feels the need to fit in with groups and society as a whole, which drives our social behaviour. As the research shows, people conform to avoid social rejection and because society expects them to behave in a certain way. Conformity can be a good thing, such as when people conform while they are driving and drive on the right side of the road, however conformity can also be a bad thing such as the guards conforming to the social roles in Zimbardo's prison experiment, causing them to display aggressive behaviours.