

The present experiment



The present experiment aimed to demonstrate that group discussion modifies personal opinion. It was hypothesised that topics discussed by groups would have a positive shift score indicating a shift towards group consensus, and topics not discussed would have a mean shift score of zero. Initially, twenty undergraduate students individually reviewed eight topics, and rated their personal opinions on each topic using a Likert scale. Participants then divided into groups where they discussed four of the eight topics. As a group, participants re-graded their original opinions. Lastly, the participants separated, re-read each topic and gave a final judgement. Marks for the group were collected and average shift scores found. The measured variable was the mean shift score for each topic. The manipulated variable was whether the groups discussed the topic or not. Results tentatively supported the hypothesis that participants attitudes on discussed topics would shift towards consensus reached by the group." That social influences shape every person's practises, judgements and beliefs is a truism to which anyone will readily assent."-Asch, 1955, p. 31The notion that individuals beliefs and actions are affected by groups with which they interact is considered foundational and indisputable by most social psychologists (Demarzo, Vayanos & Zwiebel, 2001). Social conformity is defined as the acceptance of unwritten beliefs, thoughts and actions held by the society in which they exist (Carlson & Buskist, 1997). Experimental research in the area has a history that dates back as far as Sherif (1935), with his groundbreaking research using the autokinetic effect¹ while studying the convergence of judgement in human opinion during group situations (Baron, Vandello, Brunsman, 1996, Sherif, 1935). Sherif's experiment involved a subject, first individually describing how far a light had apparently moved in

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a dark room, over 100 trials. This was followed by three group sessions (100 trials each). During group sessions, subjects each verbally related how far they thought the light had apparently moved. Sherif found that after the fourth trial, participants were unanimous in their estimation of how far the light had travelled, despite large differences in initial individual estimates (Lab Manual, Psychology 111/112, 2002). In 1950, Festinger, Schachter and Back (1950) proposed that in group interactions, individuals' views typically evolve in a predictable manner towards the standard views of the group. This proposal was reached after studying belief patterns in residents of dormitories at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Conducted over 12 months, the study followed 130 married couples, looking specifically at the formation of friendships and the uniformity of community attitudes. Results showed that the closer the couple's proximity to each other (and therefore the amount of time spent together), increased the strength of friendships of different couples. Moreover, Festinger et al found that beliefs also began to conform to those of other couples. Regardless of topic, the more time spent with the group, the stronger beliefs became (Festinger, Schachter & Back, 1950). It is argued that for a group to function at all there must be some degree of social conformity or agreement over how things will be done (Argyle, 1969). This conformity-to-social-surroundings theory was first mooted by Asch (1955) during his study of male college students. Groups of students were organised, but only one was a naive subject; the remaining group members were actually collaborators of the experimenter. All participants were shown a vertical line. They were then shown three alternative lines and were required to choose which was closest to the length of the initial stimulus. Participants were asked to call out their response in a

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preset order, with the naïve subject always last. Cohorts were instructed however to intentionally give the same, incorrect, answer. Asch looked to determine whether the naïve subject would back his perception and answer correctly, or conform to group opinion and answer incorrectly. The same procedure was also conducted with the subjects on their own, allowing the experimenter to compare single subjects responses to the responses of group members. Subjects examined individually had a mean error rate of less than 1%, while subjects in groups answered incorrectly an average of 38.6% of the time. However, some so called 'independent people' (about one quarter) never agreed with the collaborators. Asch argued that these people were necessary for society, as they allowed the population to develop and evolve through their freethinking. Asch concluded that conformity is 'an indispensable condition' for society to be productive. But to be productive, society needs individuals to think for themselves (Asch, 1955). The aim of the present experiment was to demonstrate that group discussion modifies personal opinion, and that people alter their initial judgment in the direction of a group consensus. Participants in the experiment were asked to individually review information about eight contentious topics in an opinion questionnaire. They were then asked to record their opinion about each topic using a Likert scale of one to six (1 = total agreement with the topic, 6 = total disagreement). For example, if the subject completely agreed with the legalisation of marijuana, they would rate the topic as one. Complete disagreement with the legalisation of marijuana would score six. Participants were then grouped and discussed four of the eight topics. Following discussion, participants reappraised their initial individual ratings for those topics that had been discussed in their group. The measured variable was

the mean shift score for each topic. A positive shift score would indicate that the participant had changed their opinion rating following group discussion, towards group opinion. A negative shift score would show disagreement with the group and a move away from group opinion. The manipulated variable for the present experiment was whether the groups discussed the topic or not. It was hypothesized that the topics discussed by groups would have a positive shift score, indicating that subjects were influenced by members of the group, and that those topics not discussed would have a mean shift score and standard deviation of zero, representing no change in attitude.