

"group minds" and solomon asch's experiment essay sample



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Social influences shape every person’s practices, judgments, and beliefs.

(Asch 306) In “ Opinions and Social Pressure”, Solomon Asch examines how individuals tend to conform to a group or majority. He does this by explaining the results of his experiment that he devised to observe to what extent conformity occurs. In her essay titled “ Group Minds”, Doris Lessing claims that as a society we have enough knowledge about conformity to do something about it, yet we choose not to. Although Doris Lessing and Solomon Asch both suggest that people desire independence yet yield to conformity, Asch’s experiment adds specificity to Lessing’s claims. Lessing speaks generally about groups and the effect they have on conformity, whereas Asch’s experiment examines different types of group scenarios in order to better understand the human psyche; the idea of social conformity is farther complicated by chosen and assigned groups.

Lessing and Asch recognize that most people succumb to external pressures to conform despite the claim that they are individuals. Lessing claims that an individual in the Western world has the mindset of “ I am a citizen of a free society, and that means I am an individual, making individual choices” (Lessing 333). Lessing doesn’t believe that is the case. She believes that only a small percentage of people can ever truly call themselves solitary individuals; rather, the majority of people tend to associate themselves with various groups. After viewing the results of his experiment, Asch believes that individualism exists, and that some people can rise above the pressures exerted on them. When it comes to conformity, Lessing thinks that we live

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our lives in groups and many of us cannot help but conform to group sentiments. She claims that we possess the knowledge about ourselves to do something about this tendency towards conformity, but we do nothing about it. Through his experiments, Asch discovered that conformity was indeed prevalent and that it has an immense effect on society. He believes that society needs accord, but in order for it to be productive, people must supply independent insight.

In Asch's experiment, a group of seven to nine male college students from three different New England universities were assembled in a classroom. The experimenter tells the men that they will be comparing the length of lines. Two white cards are displayed; on the first card there is one line and on the second card there are three lines. The students are instructed to choose the line on the second card that is the same length as the line on the first card. As the experiment opens, each subject chooses the same line: the correct one. The group is once again unanimous in their decision on the second round. Then on the third trial, a subject near the end deviates from the others. The dissident becomes noticeably flustered and hesitant after a few more rounds continue this way.

What the dissident does not know is that all the other members of the group were told before the experiment to give incorrect answers as a unit throughout the experiment. The dissenter is left dealing with an inner struggle, whether to maintain his stance and go against the majority or to conform. What Asch found was that approximately one-third of the time the dissenter went against their instincts after being indirectly pressured to

conform to the majority, even when the majority's opinion was noticeably
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incorrect. Asch later developed different variations on his experiment to farther examine social conformity.

According to Lessing, " It is the hardest thing in the world to maintain an individual dissident opinion, as a member of a group" (Lessing 334). In other words, when we belong to groups, we have a difficult time being an individual; our ideas become warped to fit the ideas of the group. Asch states, " The assumptions are that people submit uncritically and painlessly to external manipulation by suggestion or prestige, and that any given idea or value can be ' sold' or ' unsold' without reference to its merits." (Asch 307). What Asch is saying is that many people disregard their values and virtues without stopping to think if they really needed to be disregarded. These two quotes by Lessing and Asch tie together to illustrate how powerful a group can be and how significantly a group can affect an individual's psyche.

We give in to pressure from external forces such as authority or our peers. According to Lessing there is nothing wrong with belonging to a group, the problem arises when we do not comprehend the social principles that control groups and control us. It is apparent that groups are a significant part of our society. Does it matter how we came to be in a group? In Lessing's article, she appears to lump all groups together, whereas Asch conducts his experiments using different variables in order to study the effect of different group situations.

Lessing could have better addressed the different types of groups that exist instead of amalgamating them all together. She spoke generally of groups

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and pressures to conform instead of going more in depth. She says " The fact is that we all live our lives in groups—the family, work groups, social, religious, and political groups" (Lessing 333). She mentions specific groups such as family and political groups, but she could have added more specificity to the topics by examining each one and the effects they have the individual. Asch examines different group situations by setting up variations on his experiment.

For example, he added a partner to the experiment that would side with the dissenter. This person was either not in on the prearranged directions, or else they were told to give correct answers throughout the experiment. Asch stated, " The presence of a supporting partner depleted the majority of much of its power" (Asch 310). The subject answered incorrectly only 25% of the time instead of the previous 36. 8%. Why was this the case? It could be that the dissenting subject felt a bond or closeness towards the partner or that the partner motivated the dissenter enough to go with his instincts instead of allowing the others to sway his opinion. The " assigned group" situation probably played a role in the dissidents' behavior as well.

There are two types of groups: chosen and assigned. Are people more apt to conform when they choose the group? Most people feel that they have something invested in a chosen group. Lessing comments that " When we are in a group we tend to think as that group does: we may even have joined the group to find ' like-minded' people " (Lessing 334). Perhaps once we chose a group to be part of, we want to belong so much that we don't realize how much we sacrifice our individuality; we give in to the external forces because we want acceptance and we want to feel important.

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The group in Asch's experiment exemplifies an assigned group. None of the subjects got to choose whom they wanted to be with and the subjects did not know one another. How does this assigned group situation affect conformity? Asch said, " Out of the 123 put to the test, a considerable percentage yielded to the majority. Whereas in ordinary circumstances individuals matching the lines will make mistakes less than 1 per cent of the time, under group pressure the minority subjects swing to acceptance of the misleading majority's wrong judgments in 36. 8% of the time" (Asch 309). The subject who was not told the true nature of the experiment first felt incredulous that the other group members did not answer the same way as he did. However, as time went on, the indirect pressure on him built up and he had to either go with his instinct and say the right answer, or side with the majority even though they were wrong.

Why did 36. 8% of the subjects feel compelled to abandon their instincts? Obviously, the overwhelming majority that opposed the dissenters and the assigned group environment had an effect on many of the subjects. Perhaps the lone subjects felt embarrassed since everyone opposed their answer and they probably did not wish to make a scene. Lessing states " People who have experienced a lot of groups, who perhaps have observed their own behavior, may agree that the hardest thing in the world is to stand out against one's group" (Lessing 334). Presented with the behavior of the dissenter in Asch's experiment, she would probably conclude that the subject could not adequately surmount the force of peer pressure from the majority so he caved in and conformed.

How does conformity fluctuate when it comes to assigned groups versus chosen groups? An example of a chosen group would be the congregation of a church. It is something we as individuals make a conscious choice about; we choose where to worship and what to worship once we reach a certain age. Are we more likely to conform to people we know? Lessing claims, "we tend to think as that group does" (Lessing 334). Obviously people would not join a church if they were atheist; generally speaking we associate with groups that share our ideals. A person would probably be more apt to conform in this type of environment because the people in the group mean more to them. They know the people and the people know them. It is not like Asch's experiment where they will probably never see the people again. When someone chooses a group, they usually see the other members of the group regularly. It is then probably feasible to say that the rate of conformity is higher in a chosen group than with an assigned group because the stakes are higher.

What are the possible motives that Lessing and Asch had for writing their articles and how does that compare to the content in their pieces? Both authors are addressing the tendency for individuals to conform. Lessing's article is succinct, yet it almost has to be in order to accomplish a general overview of the topic like it seems she is trying to accomplish. The main premise in "Group Minds" is social conformity, but she also addresses how in today's society we have the knowledge to do something about conformity, but for some reason we choose not to.

It is probable that Lessing wanted to rouse interest in the topic and create an essay that can be read by many people. In his article "Opinions and Social
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Pressure", Asch was incorporating his findings on social conformity with the procedures and results of his experiment. He had a distinct purpose for authoring this piece; he wanted to expose his findings and the conclusions he came to after conducting his experiment. He had a hypothesis and wanted to use research to try and prove the hypothesis as a theory. Asch spends a significant amount of time going in depth and concocting different variations of his experiment such as introducing a confederate and drastically varying the lengths of the lines.

The main purpose of Lessing's article is to get the message out to people about social conformity; she wants something done about it so that people can be staunch individuals. She speaks of the knowledge that is known about the human mind and social conformity today and states, " But suppose this kind of thing were taught in schools?" (Lessing 335) Would teaching children these principles of group conduct and individualism have a lasting effect? If you ask most teenagers or adults about social conformity, most will know what conformity is and many will probably even acknowledge that they are involved in it themselves. It isn't that society is not educated on the topic; society does not use the knowledge it possesses to make a difference. Asch did a variation in his experiment where the difference between the line lengths are altered so that the difference is so conspicuous that the correct answer is obvious. Asch states, " We varied the discrepancy between the standard line and the other lines systematically, with the hope of reaching a point where the error of the majority would be so glaring that every subject would repudiate it and choose independently" (Asch 311).

Despite the noticeable difference, many subjects still sided with the majority. Can a society that has those types of results be reformed? Reforming an entire Western society is impossible; however, Lessing is probably on to something. With some instruction in schools, today's youth may grow up to be more individualistic than the generation before them.

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