

Asch's study on conformity

Psychology, Behaviorism



The following essay will briefly outline Solomon Asch's classic study on conformity (Asch, S. E. , 1956). , highlight the importance of the study in the field of psychology, ask if one gender tends to conform over another, explain the reasons why people conform to social norms and discuss the factors affecting conformity. Have you ever wondered why groups of teenagers dress and wear their hair so similarly? Or why people order the same dish as their partner at a restaurant?

Or why people queue in an orderly fashion at the supermarket? These are all examples of social conformity and when you look closer at our social world, they are all around us. The aim of Solomon Asch's conformity experiment (Baron, R. A. , Branscombe, N. R. , & Byrne, D. , 2009) was to investigate the extent to which social pressure from a majority group could affect a person to conform. The experiment was conducted under laboratory conditions and involved only one real participant and 7 confederates.

The real participant was unaware that there were confederates involved and was informed that it was a visual perception study. The participants had to match a standard line length to three comparison line lengths that were shown on two separate cards and announce their answer out loud. The 7 confederates were always first to answer, leaving the real participant last to act each time. On particular occasions (12 out of 18), known as clinical trials, the confederates unanimously chose a comparison line that was clearly incorrect.

Each participant took part in the experiment several times. The results showed (Baron et al. , 2009) that over the course of several studies 76 % of the participants conformed with the rest of the group's incorrect answers at <https://assignbuster.com/aschs-study-on-conformity/>

least once and 37% of the participants went along with the confederate's incorrect consensus overall. Asch also put a control group in place where adversely only 5% made such errors. In later experiments, Asch slightly varied the conditions of the experiment where one of the confederates answered correctly, agreeing with the real participant.

This broke the group's unanimity and conformity dropped to 5%. "Apparently, a single ally is all you need to "stick to your guns" and resist the pressure to conform" (Hock, R. , 2004). Further research (Morris, W. N. , Miller, R. S. , & Spangenberg, S. , 1977) supports this, whereby the experiment was recreated with 1 of the confederates giving the correct answer, going against the group consensus. The researchers found that the level of conformity depended on at what stage the confederate agreed with the participant's correct answer, early or late in the process. It now seems clear that early agreement with one's implicit response serves to solidify or strengthen the implicit response, making conformity less likely" (Morris et al. , 1977). Further research (Asch, S. E. , 1956). , also showed that when the participant did not say his answer out loud but wrote it down, the level of conformity dropped. "Often, it appears, we follow social norms overtly but don't actually change our private views" (Maas, A. , ; Clark, R. D. III, 1984as cited in Social Psychology, Baron et al.).

This shows the distinction between public conformity and private acceptance. Asch's study on conformity was important in the field of psychology because "the real power of social pressure to conform was demonstrated clearly and scientifically for the first time" (Hock, R. , 2004). Many researchers (Crutchfield, R. S. , 1955, Morris et al. , 1977, Mori, K. , ;

Arai, M. , 2010) that have reconstructed Asch's original study or conducted similar studies support the original findings for the most part. A very clever variation of the study was devised (Mori et al. 2010) without the use of confederates whereby the participants wore two types of polarized sunglasses during the critical trials which depending on the filtering of green or magenta at the top of the comparison lines would make the lines longer or shorter. This study used both men and women where Asch's experiment only involved men. " The results showed that, in line with Asch's basic findings, the minority women participants conformed to the majority. However, the study produced two different results: While minority women conformed, minority men did not.

Contrary to Asch's findings, the frequency of conformity of minority participants was almost the same regardless of whether the majority answered unanimously or not" (Mori et al. , 2010). This asks the question whether men and women differ in their tendency to conform. Researchers (Sistrunk, F. , ; McDavid, J. W. , 1971) carried out an experiment to try and find out if one gender has a tendency to conform more than another. The researchers concluded that gender did not affect the likelihood to conform but " a disregard for particular characteristics of the having male or female together with the particular nature of the judgmental tasks which have been employed in experimental studies of conformity may have contributed to artificially inflated observations of sex-determined differences" (Sistrunk et al.) But why do people conform? Asch interviewed the participants of his experiment afterwards and asked them why they went along with the

general consensus of the group. Many of the participants simply replied because they did not want to feel stupid or embarrassed.

This supports the theory (League, B. , ; Jackson, D. N. , 1964) of the connection between conformity and self-esteem. " Research in the area of conformity generally supports the hypothesis that persons with low self-value tend to be more conformant to social pressures than persons with high self-value" (League, B. , ; Jackson, D. N. , 1964). Other factors that can increase conformity are the cohesiveness of the group. There is a mounting body of evidence (Crandall, C. S. , 1988, Latane, B. , ; L'Herrou, T. 1996) that suggests that the more attracted or committed to the group you are a part of, the more likely you are to conform. Two groups of college girls in sororities were studied (Crandall, C. S. , 1988) with respect to popularity patterns and binge eating. In sorority alpha the further from the mean level of binge eating was correlated with being less popular. In sorority beta the more the women binged the more popular she was. " Most important, however, is the correlation which directly indicates social influence: Women became more like their friends over time. (Crandall, C. S. , 1988). Another factor that can influence conformity is the size of the group. Conformity was originally thought by researchers (Gerard, H. B. , Wilhemly, R. A. , & Conolley, E. S. , 1968) to increase with group size but it would seem to plateau up to three or more members. " The major hypothesis of the present study, which was not supported, was that the independent condition would show a linear increase in conformity through all group sizes" (Gerard et al.). But later research (Bond, R. , & Smith, P. B. , 1996), a meta-analysis of 133 Asch-like line judgement studies from 17 countries showed that conformity

tends to increase up to 8 group members and then level off. The meta-analysis conducted by (Bond et al. , 1996) was to examine whether conformity has changed over time and whether culture plays a significant role in conformity levels. The results (focusing on analysis conducted only in the U. S.) showed that “ levels of conformity in general had steadily declined since Asch's studies in the early 1950s” (Bond et al. , 1996).

The hypothesis that conformity in collectivist cultures (China, Asia) would be higher than in individualistic cultures (US, Europe) from analyses of cultural values from studies (Hofstede, 1980, 1983, Schwartz, 1994, Trompenaars, 1993) was confirmed. “ Moreover, the impact of the cultural variables was greater than any other, including those moderator variables such as majority size typically identified as being important factors. Cultural values, it would seem, are significant mediators of response in group pressure experiments” (Bond et al. , 1996)

To summarise, Asch's study on conformity (Asch, S. E. , 1956) shows that social pressure from a majority group can affect a person to conform. Asch and others (Morris et al. 1977) also show that if the unanimity of the group is broken, conformity decreases and (Maas et al. , 1984) distinguishes between public commitment and private acceptance. There have been conflicting studies (Mori et al. , 2010, Sistrunk et al. 1971) on whether one gender conforms more than another. Research suggests that there are many reasons for conformity; if one has low self-esteem (League et al. 1964), the cohesiveness of the group (Crandall et al. , 1988, Latane et al. , 1996), the size of the group (although there is conflicting research) (Gerard et al. , 1968, Bond et al. , 1996). To conclude, there is research (Bond et al. , 1996)

to suggest that conformity in the U. S. has decreased since Asch's original study and that in collectivistic cultures there are higher levels of conformity than in individualistic ones.

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