

## CONFORMITY. THE ASCH PARADIGM

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Imagine yourself in the following situation: You sign up for a psychology experiment, and on a specified date you and seven others whom you think are also participants arrive and are seated at a table in a small room.

You don't know it at the time, but the others are actually associates of the experimenter, and their behavior has been carefully scripted. You're the only real participant.

The experimenter arrives and tells you that the study in which you are about to participate concerns people's visual judgments. She places two cards before you. The card on the left contains one vertical line. The card on the right displays three lines of varying length.

The experimenter asks all of you, one at a time, to choose which of the three lines on the right card matches the length of the line on the left card. The task is repeated several times with different cards.

On some occasions the other "participants" unanimously choose the wrong line. It is clear to you that they are wrong, but they have all given the same answer.

What would you do? Would you go along with the majority opinion, or would you trust your own eyes?

If you were involved in this experiment how do you think you would behave? Would you conform to the majority's viewpoint?

Solomon Asch investigated this question by experiments.

### **The Asch Paradigm or Asch conformity experiments.**

Asch in 1951 devised what is now regarded as a classic experiment in social psychology, whereby there was an obvious answer to a line judgment task. If the participant gave an incorrect answer it would be clear that this was due to group pressure.

**Aim:** Solomon Asch conducted an experiment to investigate the extent to which social pressure from a majority group could affect a person to conform.

**Procedure:** Asch used a lab experiment to study conformity, whereby 123 male students from Swarthmore College in the USA participated in a 'vision test'. Using the line judgment task, Asch put a naive participant in a room with four to six confederates. The confederates had agreed in advance what their responses would be when presented with the line task. The real participant did not know this and was led to believe that the other seven participants were also real participants like themselves. Each person in the room had to state aloud which comparison line (A, B or C) was most like the target line. The answer was always obvious. The real participant sat at the end of the row and gave his or her answer last. In some trials, the seven confederates gave the wrong answer. There were 18 trials in total and the confederates gave the wrong answer on 12 trials (called the critical trials). Asch was interested to see if the real participant would conform to the majority view.

**Results:** All results are based on participants' responses to critical trials. In the control group, with no pressure to conform to confederates, the error rate was less than 1%. An examination of all critical trials in the experimental group revealed that one-third of all responses were incorrect. These incorrect responses often matched the incorrect response of the majority group (confederates). Overall, in the experimental group, 75% of the participants gave an incorrect answer to at least one question while only 25% never gave an incorrect response.

Through analysis of participants' interview responses, Asch discovered that there were vast individual differences in reaction to the experimental situation. Thus, interview data revealed that participants who did not conform to the majority group and thus, remained "independent"

from the group, reacted to the experiment in particular ways. Some reacted with "confidence" in their perception and experience. That is, despite experiencing conflict between their idea of the obvious answer and the groups incorrect answer, they stuck with the answer that was based on their own perception. Others were "withdrawn", suggesting that they stuck with their perception without experiencing conflict as those in the confidence group. Some participants also exhibited "doubt". This meant that they experienced great doubt and tension but nonetheless stuck with their correct responses because they felt a need to adequately take part in the task.

Moreover, interview data with participants that did conform to the majority group on at least one-half or more of the trials, and thus, "yielded" to the group also exhibited certain reactions to the experiment. Some participants reacted with a "distortion of perception". These participants (very few) conformed on nearly all trials and actually believed that the confederates incorrect answers were true. They were never aware that the majority gave incorrect answers. Other participants exhibited a "distortion of judgment" (most belonged to this category). This meant that participants got to a point where they realized that they must be wrong and that the majority must be right, leading them to answer with the majority. These individuals lacked confidence and were very doubtful. Lastly, participants exhibited a "distortion of action", suggesting that they knew what the correct answer was, but conformed with the majority group simply because they didn't want to seem inferior.

Asch provided a descriptive account of a subject that remained "independent" and another that "yielded". After disclosing the true nature of the experiment, the "independent" subject said that he felt happy and relieved and added, "I do not deny that at times I had the feeling: 'to go with it, I'll go along with the rest'." At the other end of the spectrum, one "yielding" subject (who conformed in 11 of 12 critical trials) said, "I suspected about the middle – but tried to push it out of my mind." Asch points out that although the "yielding" subject was suspicious, he was not able to reinstate his confidence and go against the majority.

In his 1951 experiment and subsequent studies, Asch wanted to further his investigation of conformity by examining whether slight changes in participants' environments would lead to different results. He had the following experimental variations:

1. Presence of a true partner

Asch examined whether the presence of a "true partner" influenced level of conformity. This partner was also a "real" participant or another actor that was told to give the correct response to each question. This decreased the level of conformity, especially when the partner was instructed to give correct responses.

2. Withdrawal of a partner

Asch also examined whether the removal of a partner (that he instructed to give correct answers) halfway through the experiment would influence the participants' level of conformity. He found that there was a low level of conformity during the first half of the experiment. However, once the partner left the room, the level of conformity increased dramatically.

3. Majority size

Asch also examined whether decreasing or increasing the majority size had an influence on participants' level of conformity. It was discovered that the smaller the size of the opposing group (confederates), the lower the level of conformity, and by simply increasing the opposing group to two or three persons, the level of conformity increased substantially. However, an opposing group beyond three persons (e.g., four, five six etc.) did not increase conformity.

4. Written responses

Asch wanted to know whether altering participants' method of responding would have an influence on their level of conformity. He constructed an experiment whereby all confederates verbalized their responses aloud and only the "real" participant was allowed to respond in

writing. He discovered that conformity significantly decreased when shifting from public to written responses.

**Evaluation:** All participants were male students who all belonged to the same age group. The task (judging line lengths) was artificial as it is unlikely to happen in everyday life. Therefore, it is not similar to a real life situation demonstrating conformity.

Finally, there are **ethical issues**: participants were not protected from psychological stress which may occur if they disagreed with the majority. Asch deceived the student volunteers claiming they were taking part in a 'vision' test; the real purpose was to see how the 'naive' participant would react to the behavior of the confederates.

The Asch study has also been called a **child of its time** (as conformity was the social norm in 1950's America). The era of individualism, 'doing your own thing', did not take hold until the 1960s.