

The Asch Conformity Experiments

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Line Test from the Asch Conformity Experiment

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Do you think of yourself as a conformist or a non-conformist? If you are like most people, you probably believe that you are non-conformist enough to stand up to a group when you know you are right, but conformist enough to blend in with the rest of your peers.

Imagine yourself in this situation: You've signed up to participate in a psychology experiment in

which you are asked to complete a vision test. Seated in a room with the other participants, you are shown a line segment and then asked to choose the matching line from a group three segments of different lengths. The experimenter asks each participant individually to select the matching line segment. On some occasions everyone in the group chooses the correct line, but occasionally, the other participants unanimously declare that a different line is actually the correct match.

So what do you do when the experimenter asks you which line is the right match? Do you go with your initial response, or do you choose to conform to the rest of the group?

What Were the Asch Conformity Experiments?:

In psychological terms, conformity refers to an individual's tendency to follow the unspoken rules or behaviors of the social group to which he or she belongs. Researchers have long been interested in the degree to which people follow or rebel against social norms. During the 1950s, psychologist Solomon Asch conducted a series of experiments designed to demonstrate the power of conformity in groups.

In Asch's experiments, students were told that they were participating in a 'vision test.' Unbeknownst to the subject, the other participants in the experiment were all confederates, or assistants of the experimenter. At first, the confederates answered the questions correctly, but eventually began providing incorrect answers.

Results of the Asch Conformity Experiments:

Nearly 75 percent of the participants in the conformity experiments went along with the rest of the group at least one time. After combining the trials, the results indicated that participants conformed to the incorrect group answer approximately one-third of the time. In order to ensure that participants were able to accurately gauge the length of the lines, participants were asked to individually write down the correct match. According to these results, participants were very accurate in their line judgments, choosing the correct answer 98 percent of the time.

The experiments also looked at the effect that the number of people present in the group had on conformity. When just one other confederate was present, there was virtually no impact on participants' answers. The presence of two confederates had only a tiny effect. The level of conformity seen with three or more confederates was far more significant.

Asch also found that having one of the confederates give the correct answer while the rest of the confederates gave the incorrect answer dramatically lowered conformity. In this situation, just five to ten percent of the participants conformed to the rest of the group. Later studies have also supported this finding (Morris & Miller, 1975), suggesting that having social support is an important tool in combating conformity.

What Do the Results of the Asch Conformity Experiments Indicate?:

At the conclusion of the experiments, participants were asked why they had gone along with the rest of the group. In most cases, the students stated that while they knew the rest of the group was wrong, they did not want to risk facing ridicule. A few of the participants suggested that they

actually believed the other members of the group were correct in their answers.

These results suggest that conformity can be influenced both by a need to fit in and a belief that other people are smarter or better informed. Given the level of conformity seen in Asch's experiments, conformity can be even stronger in real-life situations where stimuli are more ambiguous or more difficult to judge.

Criticisms of the Asch Conformity Experiments

One of the major criticisms of Asch's conformity experiments centers on the reasons why participants choose to conform. According to some critics, individuals may have actually been motivated to avoid conflict, rather than an actual desire to conform to the rest of the group.

Another criticism is that the results of the experiment in the lab may not generalize to real-world situations. However, many social psychology experts believe that while real-world situations may not be as clear cut as they are in the lab, the actual social pressure to conform is probably much greater, which can dramatically increase conformist behaviors.

Contribution to Psychology

The Asch conformity experiments are among the most famous in psychology's history and have inspired a wealth of additional research on conformity and group behavior. This research has provided important insight into how, why and when people conform and the effects of social pressure on behavior.

References

Asch, S. E. (1956). Studies of independence and conformity: A minority of one against a unanimous majority. *Psychological Monographs*, 70.

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