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Reading 38: THE POWER OF CONFORMITY

Asch, S. E. (1955). Opinions and social pressure. *Scientific American*, 193(5), 31–35.

Do you consider yourself to be a conformist, or are you more of a rebel? Most of us probably like to think that we are conformist enough not to be considered terribly strange or frightening, yet nonconformist enough to demonstrate that we are individuals and capable of independent thinking. Psychologists have been interested in the concept of conformity for decades. You can see why when you remember that psychological research focuses not only on explaining human behavior but also, and perhaps more importantly, on revealing the *causes* of it. The effect of people's willingness to conform to others can help us a great deal in understanding the sources of people's behavior.

When psychologists talk about conformity, they refer to individual behavior that adheres to the behavior patterns of a particular group of which that individual is a member. The usually unspoken rules or guidelines for behavior in a group are called *social norms*. If you think about it, you can probably remember a time in your life when you behaved in ways that were out of sync or in disagreement with your attitudes, beliefs, or morals. Chances are, whenever this occurred, you were part of a group in which everyone was behaving that way, so you went along with them. Conformity is a powerful force on our behavior and can, at times, cause us to behave in ways that, left to our own devices, we would never do. Therefore, conformity is clearly worthy of interest and study by behavioral scientists. However, no one undertook to study conformity scientifically until the early 1950s. Enter Solomon Asch. His experiments on conformity offered us a great deal of new information about conforming behavior and opened many doors for future research.

THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

Suppose you are with a group of people you see often, such as friends or coworkers. The group is discussing some controversial issue or political candidate. It quickly becomes clear to you that everyone in the group shares one view, which is the opposite of your own. At one point the others turn to you and ask for your opinion. What are you going to do? The choices you are faced with are to state your true views and risk the consequences of being treated as an outcast, to agree with the group consensus even though it differs from your opinion, or—if possible—to sidestep the issue entirely.

Asch wanted to find out just how powerful the need to conform is in influencing our behavior. Although conformity often involves general and

vague concepts, such as agreeing with others' attitudes, ethics, morals, and belief systems, Asch chose to focus on a much more obvious type: *perceptual conformity*—that is, the extent to which humans tend to conform with one another's perceptions of the world: what we see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. Asch chose to study conforming behavior on a simple visual comparison task so that he could examine this phenomenon in a controlled laboratory environment.

If conformity is as powerful a force as Asch and many others believed, then researchers should be able to manipulate a person's behavior by applying group pressure to conform. This is what Asch set about testing in a very elegantly designed series of experiments, all incorporating a similar method.

METHOD

The visual materials consisted simply of pairs of cards with three different lengths of vertical lines (called comparison lines) on one card and a single standard line the same length as one of three comparison lines on the other (see Figure 38-1). Here is how the experimental process worked. Imagine you are a participant who has volunteered to participate in a "visual perception study." You arrive at the experiment room and find 7 other participants already seated in a row. You sit in the one empty chair at the end of the row. The experimenter then reveals a pair of cards and asks you to determine which of the three comparison lines is the same length as the standard line. You look at the lines and immediately decide on the correct response. Starting at the far end of the row away from you, each participant is asked individually for his or her answer. Everyone gives the correct answer, and when your turn comes you give the same obviously correct answer. The card is changed, the same process happens, and—once again, no problem—you give the correct answer along with the rest of the group. On the next trial, however, something odd happens. The card is revealed and you immediately choose in your mind the correct response (this all seems quite easy!), but when the other participants give their answers this time, they all choose the *wrong* line!

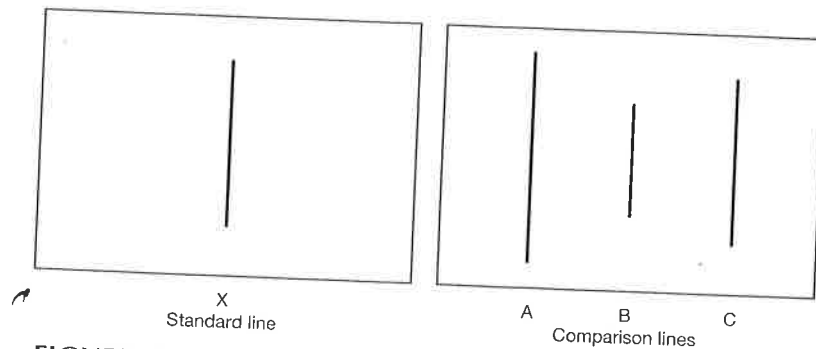


FIGURE 38-1 An example similar to Asch's line judging task card. (Adapted from p.32.)

And they all choose the *same* wrong line. Now, when it is your turn to respond again, you pause. You can't believe what is happening. Are all these other people blind? The correct answer is obvious. Isn't it? Have *you* gone blind? Or crazy? You now must make a decision. Do you maintain your opinion (after all, the lines are right in front of your nose), or do you conform and agree with the rest of the group?

As you have probably figured out by now, the other 7 "participants" in the room were not participants at all but, rather, confederates of the experimenter. They were in on the experiment from the beginning, and the answers they gave were, of course, the key to this study of conformity. So, how did the real participants in the study answer?

RESULTS

Each participant participated in the experimental situation several times. Approximately 75% went along with the group's incorrect consensus at least once. For all trials combined, participants agreed with the group on the incorrect responses about one-third of the time. Just to be sure that the line lengths could be judged accurately, individuals in a control group of participants was asked simply to write down their answers to the line comparison questions. Participants in this group were correct 98% of the time.

DISCUSSION AND RELATED RESEARCH

The powerful effects of group pressures to conform were clearly demonstrated in Asch's study. If individuals are willing to conform to a group of people they hardly know about a clearly incorrect judgment, how strong must this influence be in real life, where groups exert even stronger forces and issues are more ambiguous? Conformity as a major factor in human behavior, the subject of widespread speculation for years, had now been scientifically established.

Asch's results were important to the field of psychology in two crucial ways. First, as discussed, the real power of social pressure to conform was demonstrated clearly and scientifically for the first time. Second, and perhaps even more important, this early research sparked a huge wave of additional studies that continue right up to the present. The body of research that has accumulated since Asch's early studies has greatly elaborated our knowledge of the specific factors that determine the effects conformity has on our behavior. Some of these findings follow:

1. *Social support.* Asch conducted his same experiment with a slight variation. He altered the answers of the confederates so that in the test condition 1 confederate of the 7 gave the correct answer. When this occurred, only 5% of the participants agreed with the group consensus. Apparently, a single ally is all you need to "stick to your guns" and resist the pressure to conform. This finding has been supported by several later studies (e.g., Morris & Miller, 1975).

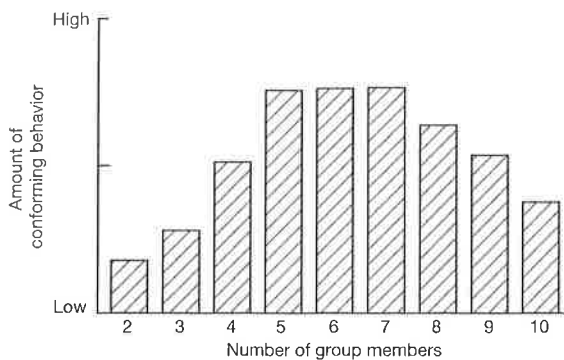


FIGURE 38-2 The relationship between group size and conformity. (Adapted from p. 35.)

- Attraction and commitment to the group.* Later research demonstrated that the more attracted and committed you are to a particular group, the more likely you are to conform to the behavior and attitudes of that group (see Forsyth, 1983). If you like the group and feel that you belong with its members (they are called your *reference group*), your tendency to conform to that group will be very strong.
- Size of the group.* At first, research by Asch and others demonstrated that the tendency to conform increases as the size of the group increases. However, upon further examination, it was found that this connection is not so simple. While it is true that conformity increases as the size of the group increases, this only holds for groups up to 6 or 7 members. As the group size increases beyond this number, conformity levels off, and even decreases somewhat. This is shown graphically in Figure 38-2. Asch has suggested this happens because as the group becomes large, people may begin to suspect the other members of working together purposefully to affect their behavior and, in response, they become resistant to this obvious pressure.
- Sex.* Do you think men and women differ in their tendency or willingness to conform? Early studies that followed Asch's work indicated that women seemed to be much more willing to conform than men. This was such a strong and frequently repeated finding that it entered the psychological literature as an accepted difference between the sexes. However, later research drew this notion into question. It appears that many of the early studies (all conducted by men) inadvertently created testing conditions that were more familiar and comfortable for men in those days than for women. Psychologists know that people will tend to conform more when placed in a situation where standards for appropriate behavior are unclear. Therefore, the finding of greater conformity among women may have simply been a systematic error caused by subtle (and unintentional) biases in the methods used. Research under better controlled conditions has failed to find this sex difference in conformity behavior (see Sistrunk & McDavid, 1971, for a discussion of these gender-related issues).

Numerous additional areas related to the issue of conformity also have been studied. These include cultural influences, the amount of information available when making decisions about conforming, personal privacy, and many others.

CRITICISMS

Asch's work on conformity has received widespread support and acceptance. It has been replicated in many studies, under a wide variety of conditions. One criticism concerns whether Asch's findings can be generalized outside of the lab and to the real world. In other words, does a participant's answer in a laboratory about the length of some lines really have very much to do with conforming behavior in life? This is a valid criticism for all research about human behavior that is carried out in a controlled laboratory setting. What this criticism says is "Maybe the subjects were willing to go along with the group on something so trivial and unimportant as the length of a line, but in real life, and on important matters, they would not conform so readily." However, although real-life matters of conformity can certainly be more meaningful, it is equally likely that the pressures for conformity from groups in the real world are also proportionately stronger.

RECENT APPLICATIONS

An article examining why young adults continue to engage in unsafe sexual practices demonstrates how Asch's work continues to influence research on important social issues (Cerwonka, Isbell, & Hansen, 2000). The researchers assessed nearly 400 students between the ages of 18 and 29 on various measures of their HIV/AIDS knowledge risk behaviors (such as failure to use condoms, multiple sex partners, alcohol and other drug use, and sexual history). Numerous factors were shown to predict high-risk sexual behaviors, including *conformity to peer group pressures*. You can see how an understanding of conformity pressures on people's choices about their sexual behaviors might be a valuable tool in fighting the continuing spread of HIV.

Another fascinating study incorporated Asch's 1955 article to examine why men are less likely than women to seek help, even when they are in dire need of it (Mansfield et al., 2003). This article begins with the following (old) joke: "Why did Moses spend 40 years wandering in the desert? Because he wouldn't ask for directions" (p. 93). This joke is (sort of) funny because it taps into a stereotype about men and help-seeking. Of course, failure to ask for directions *usually* does not cause serious problems, but men also tend to resist seeking medical and mental health care, and that can be dangerous or even fatal. The authors suggest that one of the primary forces preventing men from seeking help is conformity. "In the context of help seeking, men may be disinclined to seek help if they believe they will be stigmatized for doing so. . . . If a man greatly admires the people in his life who discourage or speak badly of seeking help, he will be less likely to seek help himself" (p. 101).

On a final note, culture appears to play an especially important role in conformity (Bond & Smith, 1996). Research in collectivist countries, such as Japan or India, has consistently found higher levels of conformity than in individualistic countries, such as the United States (see Triandis's research on collectivist and individualistic cultures in Reading 28). Such findings add to the ever-growing body of evidence that psychological research must never overlook the impact of culture on virtually all human behaviors.

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Reading 39: TO HELP OR NOT TO HELP

Darley, J. M., & Latané, B. (1968). Bystander intervention in emergencies: Diffusion of responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *8*, 377–383.

One of the most influential events in the history of psychological research was not a study at all but a violent and tragic event in New York City that was picked up by media news services across the United States. In 1964, a young woman, Kitty Genovese, was returning to her apartment in a quiet, middle-class neighborhood in Queens after closing the Manhattan bar that she managed. As she left her car and walked toward her building, she was viciously attacked by a man with a knife. As the man stabbed her several times, she screamed for help. One neighbor yelled out of his window for the man to “leave that girl alone,” at which time the attacker began to run away. But then he turned, knocked Genovese to the ground, and began stabbing her again. The attack continued, and her screaming continued until finally someone telephoned the police. The police arrived 2 minutes after they were called, but Genovese was already dead and her attacker had disappeared. The attack had lasted 35 minutes. During their investigations, police found that 38 people in the surrounding apartments had witnessed the attack, but only 1 had eventually called the police. One couple (who said they assumed someone else had called the police) had moved two chairs next to their window to watch the violence. Genovese's killer, Winston Moseley, now in his 70s, remains incarcerated at a maximum-security prison in upstate New York. He has been denied parole 12 times during his 42 years in prison. His next parole hearing is scheduled for 2008.

If someone had acted sooner to help Genovese, she probably would have survived. New York City and the nation were appalled by the seeming