***Evaluate research on conformity to group norms.***

Introduction: Define conformity. Zimbardo and Leippe (1991) define conformity as:

‘…a change in belief or behaviour in response to real or imagined group pressure when there is no direct request to comply with the group nor any reason to justify behaviour change’.

* Point 1: Conformity to a perceived group norm
* Supporting evidence: Sherif (1936) Autokinetic effect. Aim, method, findings.
* Elaboration: Participants use each other’s estimates as a frame of reference to establish a group norm. Social norms emerge to guide behavior when people find themselves in uncertain situations.
* Evaluation:

+ Sherif’s study is very influential and has generated a large amount of research. Supported by Jenness (1932) who had similar findings.

+ The study demonstrates how a group norm is established and continues to influence a person’s judgement even when the social influence is no longer present.

- The experiment was conducted in a laboratory. The task was artificial and ambiguous and this could influence the results. Lacks ecological validity. There was no “correct” answer. It is not very surprising that individuals rely on the judgments of others when they have no clear way of deciding what judgments to make.

- Ethics: participants were not informed about the purpose of the experiment (informed consent) but this was not the norm at the time of Sherif’s experiment.

- Doesn’t assess conformity directly. There was no majority influencing a minority. Jacobs and Campbell (1961) used the autokinetic affect but arranged for all but one of the participants in the experiment to give the same judgment. They found strong evidence for conformity.

* Point 2: Conformity to a majority
* Supporting evidence: Asch (1951) Aim, method, findings.
* Elaboration: Perceived group pressure by a majority can influence a minority in an unambiguous situation (in the control group, 0.7% of errors were made).
* Evaluation:

+ A high degree of control ensures that a cause-effect relationship can be established between variables.

+ Asch’s results have been replicated several times so the results are reliable.

+ Crutchfield. Participants placed in a separate booth, facing a screen with questions and what they believed were other people’s responses.

In around half (50%) of the cases the answers displayed were incorrect. Participants believed they were last to answer. On an Asch type perceptual task 30% of the responses conformed to the wrong answer. Conformity does occur without face to face communication.

+ The results, in terms of conformity rates, can explain, to some extent, why people conform to social and cultural norms in real life. Wider applications.

+ Conformity may be universal (population validity) to some degree but conformity rates vary cross culturally.

- Laboratory experiments are artificial and difficult to generalize to real life (issues of ecological validity). Demand characteristics-participants were aware they were in a study.

- Only showed conformity in a trivial situation, in which the participants’ deeply held beliefs were not called into question.

- The experiment was conducted in the USA with male student participants so this affects generalization.

- Participants were paid which may have made them feel that they had entered into a kind of social contract where they had to obey the norms of the experimental situation. Participants don’t want to spoil the research. Demand characteristics.

- Remember, there were more non-conforming responses than conforming ones.

- The results can only explain how a majority may influence a minority but not the other way round.

- Ethical issues. The participants were deceived about the purpose of the experiment, no informed consent. Asch’s participants were put in a difficult and embarrassing position among a group of strangers. Bogdonoff et al. (1961) found that participants in an Asch-type study had greatly increased levels of autonomic arousal-physical stress response.

* Point 3: Can conformity research reveal anything about conformity in real life?
* Supporting evidence: Moghaddam et al (1993) argue that the research may have a social and cultural bias. Sherif’s study was conducted in the USA in a time when conformity was the norm and this may have changed.
* Elaboration: Nicholson et al (1985) suggest that participants now tend to conform less in Asch like experiments. This could indicate that levels of conformity are context dependent and may change over time. Also levels of conformity may be different in other cultures.
* Evaluation: Moscovici (1976) –(Minority influence) argues that traditional conformity research cannot explain the minority influences on the majority, which have been observed in real life (e.g. Woman Suffrage movement). Also In-group minorities have a greater chance of exerting influence than out-group minorities.
* Conclusion –Perhaps Moscovici. Zimbardo good to evaluate due to ethics-remember it is conforming to a social role (not majority influencing minority).