**Learning Outcome:**

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

**Conformity**

**Conformity** is a type of social influence involving a change in belief or behaviour in order to fit in with a group.

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There are a few different definitions of conformity and these are given below.

“A change in behaviour or belief as a result of real or imagined pressure”

~ David Myers, 1999

“A tendency for people to adopt the behaviour, attitudes and values of other members of a reference group”

~ Zimbardo, 1995

Myers’ definition is easy to identify with because at some point we have all probably felt like we are being pressured to behave a certain way or change our mind about something in order to maintain the status quo as such.

Zimbardos’ definition is saying that when we conform we are simply going along with the people who we most compare ourselves to – the reference group – because we wish to maintain our status.



Do you know what the words below mean?

* autonomous
* conformity
* social influence
* social norms

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**The Work of Muzafer Sherif**

This idea of ‘norms’ has interested many psychologists. The well known study in this area was conducted by Muzafer Sherif in 1935.

Sherif wanted to investigate whether a group norm would emerge when individuals were faced with an ambiguous task.

Read the description of the study then recreate it in your own words below. Include the key elements below.

<http://www.psywww.com/intropsych/ch15_social/sherif_1936_group_norms_and_conformity.html>

* How did Sherif investigate group norms?
* What did he ask his participants to do?
* What did he find happened in the different conditions?
* What did the study show?

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So, now we know what conformity is, have looked at groups and realised that we’re not as autonomous as we’d like (based on the fact we follow social or group norms), have learnt about the work done by Sherif which shows that we look to others in ambiguous situations but keep hold of the norm once it is established – let’s move on…

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**Asch’s research into conformity**

The most famous and significant psychological study into conformity was conducted by Solomon Asch (1951). His work remains one of the most influential studies in this area.

Asch’s research followed that of Sherif’s. Asch thought that the results Sherif found could be explained by the fact that the task he had set them (the autokinetic light) was ambiguous. He wondered what would happen if participants were exposed to normative social influence in a group situation where there was no doubt about the correct answer to a question.

Asch wanted to find out how many participants would conform to the group, even when it was clear that the group answer was wrong. Before the experiment took place, Asch predicted that very few people would conform to give a clearly wrong answer.

Read page 120 of the Course Companion and <http://www.simplypsychology.org/asch-conformity.html> (there were six not seven confederates)

These both describe Asch’s study. Then complete the report below, making sure to include all the relevant details.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Aim |  |
| Method | [http://tbn0.google.com/images?q=tbn:vxPvqXAL3NH9YM:http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/47/Asch_experiment.png](http://images.google.co.uk/imgres?imgurl=http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/47/Asch_experiment.png&imgrefurl=http://www.change-management-toolbook.com/Share/Blog/tabid/242/EntryID/659/language/en-US/Default.aspx&h=492&w=600&sz=13&hl=en&start=1&usg=__bEGircFlJce4CshFWTemohEK4xY=&tbnid=vxPvqXAL3NH9YM:&tbnh=111&tbnw=135&prev=/images?q=asch+line+test&gbv=2&hl=en) |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Findings |  |

The evaluation of Ash’s study says that;

* all the participants were male college students

Why might this be a problem in research?

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The evaluation also points out that;

* the time (as in the date/year) and place (as in the USA) when and where the research was carried out might have affected the findings

Why might these factors have affected the research?

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Can you identify any other problems with Asch’s experiment?

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**Why do people conform?**

The dual-process model by Deutsch and Gerard (1955), suggests that there are two reasons why people are likely to conform:

* Normative social influence
* Informational social influence

Use the hand-out to outline the following

Normative Social Influence (NSI)

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Informational Social Influence (ISI)

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Deutsch and Gerard’s view of conformity has been criticised because it suggests that these two types of conformity are separate and independent from one another. Other research, by Insko et al, 1983) has suggested that in fact, normative and information social influence often work alongside each other.

Referent informational influence

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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**Extending Asch’s research**

After his original research, Asch decided that he wanted to try to find out which features of the experiment might have been responsible for the results. He basically wanted to see which features in a situation would be most likely to make someone conform. He decided that the best way to investigate this would be to recreate his experiment but vary some of the situational features of it. Read page 120-121 of the course companion and then outline how each of the changes made affected the results of the study.

**Situational factors**

Group size…

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Unanimity…

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Situational factors are not the only thing that can change levels of conformity

**Dispositional factors**

Confidence…..

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Low self esteem…..

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**Further research into conformity**

One of the good things about Asch’s research, despite all the criticisms made against it, was that it generated quite a significant amount of further research.

It’s important that you are able to offer other research in order to support or to provide alternative theories in all topics in psychology.

When participants can’t see each other

MCj01496030000[1]Crutchfield (1955) thought that the reason people conformed in Asch’s study may have been to do with the fact that they were face-to-face with other participants. He decided to test his theory by repeating Asch’s line test, as well as using other stimulus materials while seating his participants in booths that prevented them from seeing each other. Each participant had a row of switches and lights in front of them. They had to press the switch which corresponded to their answer and were told that the lights on the display panel showed the answers that had been given by other participants (which was a lie because actually the research controlled them!)

The results showed that;

* conformity levels were 30% when using Asch’s line test
* conformity levels increased as tasks became harder

This shows that people still conformed significantly despite the lack of face-to-face contact.

**Research Methods in Conformity Studies**

MCj02875010000[1]

Both Sherif and Asch’s studies the **Laboratory Experiment** is used as a method.

The situation in a lab experiment is highly controlled and in fact, one of the biggest advantages of using a lab experiment is the high level of control that the researcher can have over the variables. One advantage of this is that such experiments can establish whether or not there is cause and effect (whether one thing causes another to happen) and this is at the heart of science.

Lab experiments make use of artificial groups and because of this in Asch’s study we see a lack of validity because people are with strangers. In real-life settings conformity usually takes place when people are in groups with whom they have long-standing ties; groups of friends, colleagues and family members.

Others have argued that Asch’s study is a child of its time, as we have seen. This is an important criticisms as it determines whether or not the results can be said to reflect behaviour generally or simply just amongst a specific group in a specific place at a specific time.

Finally, we have to think about the ethical issues involved in any experiment. In these studies participants could not give **fully informed consent** because they were unaware of certain aspects of the study. According to the BPS, in psychological research, participants should be given the opportunity to provide fully informed consent – that is, to know exactly what is going to happen. Another issue was that of **protection from harm**. Participants were stressed and experienced discomfort during the experiments. Even though this was temporary, it is an issue because the BPS says that participants should be protected from all harm, physical and psychological.

**Learning Outcome:**

**Discuss factors influencing conformity**

**N.B. *For this learning outcome you can also include situational factors that influence conformity: Group Size and Group Unanimity.***

**Minority influence**

**Does the majority always rule? Read the bottom paragraph of page121 of the Course Companion. Outline the study by Moscovici and Lage (1976) (AMF’s).**

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**Describe below how Moscovici’s findings do not support findings from traditional conformity research.**

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**Culture as a factor influencing conformity**

Complete the table below. Use p123 of the Course Companion to help.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Research done by… | Type of study | How do the findings support the claim? |
| Smith and Bond 1996  Berry 1967 | Meta-analysis is a statistical procedure, often used in psychology, which combines the results of several studies addressing the same hypothesis. The outcome is an average measure of the effects obtained in the individual studies. Usually it is a weighted average: the better studies (e.g. those with the bigger sample sizes) are allowed to influence the outcome to a greater extent.  133 conformity experiments  Almost 5,000 participants  17 different countries  Laboratory experiment |  |

**Groupthink and the “risky shift”**

We spend a lot of time in groups so how does conformity affect our decision-making? This would be an area that could test conformity in an everyday situation.

**Irving Janis** was a social psychologist at Yale University. He was interested in how conscientious and brilliant politicians can sometimes make disastrous political decisions with far reaching consequences.

**Janis 1972**

Studied archives for political records and identified a range of decisions made by American administrations with clear political consequences. For example to invade Cuba at the Bay of Pigs (1961) and to escalate the Korean War. Other decisions had positive outcomes such as the Cuban missile crisis.

Using content analysis, Janis examined the ways in which the decisions had been reached and identified 3 important features that seemed to precede poor decisions. These were:

* High group cohesiveness- group members were closely bonded
* Insulation from other, expert views about the situation
* Situational forces, including a highly stressful environment-groups were under pressure to make fast decisions

Janis argued that poor decisions arose from a phenomenon he termed ‘**groupthink**’.

**Groupthink** - the tendency for groups to make poor decisions driven by the need for a united front and conformity.

Groupthink occurs when:

* Each group member conforms to what they believe is the overall group consensus-even when none of the group members personally would have chosen that course of action.
* Group decisions are seen as simple choices between two alternative actions (e.g. invade or don’t invade), with other alternatives being overlooked or ignored.
* The group is insulated from other people’s views and objective experts are not consulted.

Janis defined ‘groupthink’ as “a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the member’s strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative course of action” Janis 1972.

A concept related to groupthink is the ‘**risky shift’**. This term refers to the tendency for group discussions to produce riskier decisions than those reached by group members working on their own. This occurs when group members have a view in a particular direction but exaggerate this to an extreme position that goes beyond the beliefs of individual group members.

However, it has been found that tight cohesive groups sometimes make more cautious decisions rather than risky ones. This demonstrates that group decisions have a tendency to become polarized and move to a more extreme position, but this can sometimes be towards extreme safety. For this reason, the term ‘**group polarization’** is generally preferred over ‘**risky shift**’.

- Group polarization exists, but the causes underlying it may be different and more complex than those suggested by Janis.

- Janis carried out content analysis which is a qualitative methodology. Attempts to generate groupthink experimentally have been largely unsuccessful. This had lead some psychologists to suggest that Janis cannot justify a cause and effect relationship in groupthink.

Applications: It is suggested that to minimise groupthink, groups must encourage argument and discussion about decisions and should bring in outside, objective experts where possible.

ERQ Outline: **Discuss factors influencing conformity**