

**Learning Outcome:** Factors influencing Conformity

1. **Definition of Conformity**

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| Conformity can as “yielding to group pressure” (Crutchfield, 1962).  Use Informational Social Influence and Normative Social Influence to describe types of conformity.  According to Aronson (1976) people conform both in the physical presence of others and to social norms or expectations, even when no one is physically around. Conformity can occur even when the influencing group is in the minority – this is called minority influence. |

1. **Understanding of conformity from classic studies**

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| A number of classic studies exploring conformity have found a number of factors that affected the results in the experimenter’s research. These include the ambiguity of the situation in Sherif’s experiments, the unanimity of the group as in Asch experiments, and the cultural background of the participants. However, further studies and an in-depth insight into these factors has led researchers to conclude the importance and role of these factors in affecting conformity levels of participants. |

1. **Factors affecting conformity**

Personality

Group Identification

Social Support

Factors affecting Conformity

Group Size

Time

Gender

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| **Mnemonic (Make one)** |

**Group Identification**

**P**OINT

Research has indicated that normative social influence (NSI) is stronger in groups to which people feel they belong. Within such groups the costs of non-conformity are than in groups of strangers. People have more to lose if they offend or upset their family, friends and workmates. To what extent do feelings of belonging to and identifying with groups influence conformity?

**E**VIDENCE

1. Abrams et al. (1990) attempted to answer this question using experiments based on those of Sherif and Asch. The participants were psychology students. They were placed in two groups, one containing people they believed were fellow psychology students, the other containing people they were told were students of ancient history.

In Abrams’ version of Sherif’s autokinetic experiment the convergence of estimates, which Sherif found in all groups, only occurred in the “psychology group”.

1. In Abrams’ version of Asch’s line judgment experiment, the level of conformity in the “psychology group” was even higher than in the original Asch experiment. However, the level of conformity in the “ancient history” group was considerably lower.

**E**LABORATION

This study suggests…

1. social influence to conform is stronger when people identify with a group.
2. social influence to conform is less strong when people identify with a group.
3. social influence to conform does not exist when people identify with a group.

√ - These experiments add a new dimension to studies of conformity.

√ - People do conform when they feel they are part of a group. In this case the participants saw the “psychology group” as people like themselves, as peers. As a result, they expected to share their attitudes and beliefs, they expected to agree with them and wanted to fit in with them.

√ - Approval from those they saw as their peers meant more to them than approval from the “ancient history” group. There is less pressure to conform when people are seen as different from ourselves.

**Group Size**

**There are many other findings related to Asch’s ‘line comparison’ experiment. See p16 of your conformity booklet**

**P**OINT

Experiments have indicated that group size has an important effect on conformity.

**E**VIDENCE

1. Asch (1951) found that in a **one-to-one** situation – one participant and one confederate – the confederate’s incorrect answers make little difference. After all, it is only one person’s judgment against another.

However, if there are **two confederates**, the participant’s error rate, and therefore conformity, rises to 13%.

With **three confederates**, conformity rises still further to 33%.

Asch found that conformity does not rise much beyond this level, no matter how big the group gets. There is a **nonlinear relationship** between the size of the majority and conformity. That is, majority influence significantly increases until some **critical majority size** is reached. After that, the addition of more majority members does not significantly increase conformity.

**E**VIDENCE

1. Milgram and colleagues (1969) found that increasing the number of individuals (confederates of the experimenter) on a sidewalk who looked upward toward the sky increased conformity (% of passerby looking upward) up to the majority of five and then leveled off.

**E**LABORATION

This study suggests…

1. group size plays a role in affecting conformity levels.
2. Group size and number of confederates influencing can play a role.
3. Group size plays no role and is no factor affecting conformity.

√ - Many replications of Asch’s study have shown these findings to be robust.

√ - Conformity seems to be at its maximum with 3-5 person majority (Stang, 1976).

In some conditions, a greater majority of 15 led to slightly lower levels of conformity, perhaps because participants became increasingly suspicious when confronted with a majority of 15 apparently mad people.

**Social Support**

**P**OINT

A number of studies have indicated that social support plays a significant role in people conforming.

**E**VIDENCE

1. Asch (1955) gave participants a “supporter” or “ally”. This confederate gave the correct answer in every case, while other confederates continued to give wrong answers. No longer was the participant alone; social support had been provided. In this situation, the conformity rate reduced dramatically to an average of 5.5%.

**E**LABORATION

1. These studies suggests…\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

√ - A number of other studies have produced similar results. It appears that having someone to “back us up” gives people the confidence to resist NSI.

√ - True Partner Effect (when we perceive that there is someone who supports our position; we are less likely to conform than if we are alone facing an unanimous majority) – Support from Asch’s study where true partner emerged at some point during his experiment. The true partner would break with the incorrect majority and support the real participants judgment. Results were striking and conformity was cut by 80%.

**Personality**

**There is also Crutchfield’s conforming personality theory. See p17 of your conformity booklet**

**P**OINT

Research has indicated that there are wide differences in conformity between individuals. This has led some researchers to argue that this reflects differences in personality. They claim that some people have personality characteristics which predispose them to conform.

**E**VIDENCE

1. Asch (1956) suggested that people with low self esteem – a low opinion of themselves – tend to conform because they are more likely to fear disapproval and rejection from the group.
2. Hogg and Vaughan (1995) indicate that the following characteristics are associated with conformity: low self-esteem, a high need for social approval, feelings of inferiority and insecurity, high levels of anxiety and low IQ play a role in conformity.

**E**LABORATION

These studies suggests…\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

X – The relationship between personality and conformity is not as clear-cut as the research suggests.

X – Some studies have found little or no relationship between them.

X – One of the main findings is that there is little consistency in people’s behaviour.

Aronson et al (1997) indicates that in one situation people may conform and in another they don’t. If their personality was the main factor affecting their behaviour then this inconsistency would be unlikely. It appears that the social situation is more important in accounting for conformity than differences in personality.

**Gende**r

**P**OINT

For many years it was assumed that women were more conforming than men. Research indicated that though gender differences in conformity were small, they did exist.

**E**VIDENCE

1. Eagly and Carli (1981) found that male researchers were more likely to find higher levels of conformity in women than female researchers. This may, in part, be due to male researchers using tasks in their experiments which were more familiar to male participants.
2. Analysis of research also shows that there are conditions under which women are more likely to conform than men and others under which men are more likely to conform than women (Eagly and Chrvala, 1986). For example, women are more likely to conform than men in group pressure situations – that is, under conditions of NSI – than in persuasion situations, where ISI is being applied (Eagly, 1978; Eagly and Carli, 1981).
3. Women tend to be more sensitive than men in conformity pressures when their behaviour is under surveillance – that is, when they have to state their opinions publicly (Eagly, Wood and Fishbaugh, 1981).

**E**LABORATION

These studies suggest…\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

√ - Support for this view comes from a conformity experiment by Sistrunk and McDavid (1971). Male and female participants were asked to identify various things while being subjected to group pressure to give the wrong answer – and so conform

Some participants were given traditionally male items (eg wrench), others were given traditionally female items (eg different types of needlework), while others were given “neutral” items (eg identifying rock stars).

Conformity for women was highest on male items, conformity for men was highest on female items, and for “neutral” items, conformity levels were similar for both sexes.

This study indicates that there are no significant differences in conformity between men and women. It also suggests that gender differences may be revealed by other studies may be due to the nature of the experiments rather than any real differences between men and women.

**Time/Cultural**

**See also ‘Berry’ study in Principle 2 on cover of conformity booklet**

**P**OINT

One of the criticisms made of Asch’s study was that it was carried out in America in the 1950s when conformity was high. The question remains as to how much conformity varies in different places and at different historical periods.

**E**VIDENCE

1. Perrin and Spencer (1981) carried out an experiment to assess the differences in conformity 25 years after Asch’s original research, comparing different groups of young men.

* Same line judgment task was used.
* In one condition, 33 male students were used
* In another, 20 male students who were on probation were used

**Results**

* In male students not on probation – conformity was non-existent with only 1 in 396 trials producing a conforming response. This suggests that conformity in 1981 was much lower than Asch had originally found in the 1950s.
* Young men on probation showed similar results of conformity to those in Asch’s 1950 studies, implying that conformity still takes place when people are placed with those who have power or authority over them.

What about **E**LABORATION

√ - These findings strongly support the claim that we cannot generalize regarding rates of conformity.

√ - Others have assessed conformity more recently using a modified version of Asch’s task, which is more ambiguous and has a less obvious answer. Lalancette (1990) used 40 students.

√ - Like Perrin and Spencer - Lalancette found no evidence of conformity and concluded from this that the conformity effect shown in Asch’s study was an “unpredictable phenomenon, not a stable tendency of human behaviour”.

√ - Together, the findings of these studies suggest that conformity is much lower in the Western world today than it was in the middle of last century.

**EXAM ESSAY TIME**

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| **Which factors would you use to write in a 8 marker question?** |

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| **Essay Plan/Structure (22 Marker) – How would you construct this essay?**  **1**  **2**  **3**  **4**  **5**  **6**  **7**  **8**  **9**  **10**  **11** |