

Name: _____ Class: _____

Asch Experiment

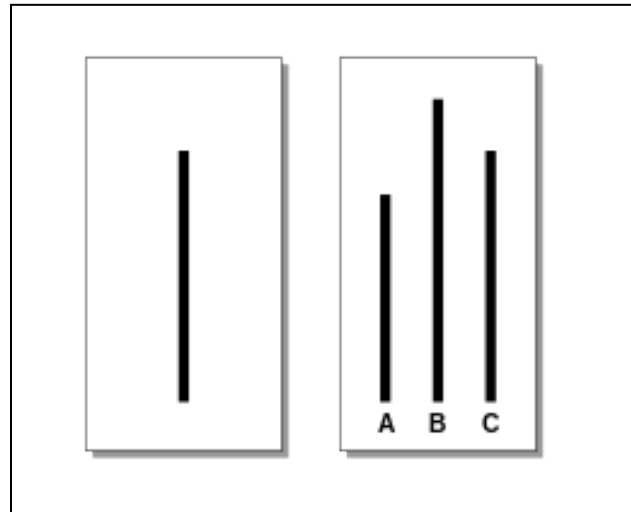
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Conducted by social psychologist Solomon Asch, the Asch Experiments were a series of laboratory experiments intended to demonstrate how individual opinions are influenced by a group. As you read, take notes about what leads people to conform to group opinion.

- [1] Imagine yourself in the following situation: You sign up for a psychology experiment, and on a specified date you and seven others whom you think are also participants arrive and are seated at a table in a small room.

You don't know it at the time, but the others are actually associates¹ of the experimenter, and their behavior has been carefully scripted. You're the only real participant.

The experimenter arrives and tells you that the study in which you are about to participate concerns people's visual judgments. She places two cards before you. The card on the left contains one vertical line. The card on the right displays three lines of varying length.



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The experimenter asks all of you, one at a time, to choose which of the three lines on the right card matches the length of the line on the left card. The task is repeated several times with different cards.

- [5] On some occasions the other "participants" unanimously² choose the wrong line. It is clear to you that they are wrong, but they have all given the same answer.

What would you do? Would you go along with the majority opinion, or would you "stick to your guns" and trust your own eyes?

If you were involved in this experiment how do you think you would behave? Would you conform to the majority's viewpoint?

1. **Associate (noun):** someone who is closely connected to another person as a companion, friend, or business partner
 2. **Unanimously (adverb):** in total agreement; with no opposition

Solomon Asch—Conformity Experiment

In 1935, a social psychologist named Muzafer Sherif conducted an experiment to determine to what extent ordinary people will conform to a group's behavior. In the study, three participants are brought into a totally dark room. Then, a small dot of light is shown on a wall, and after a few moments, the dot appears to move (the dot doesn't actually move; this effect is entirely inside-the-head, resulting from the complete lack of "frame of reference" for the movement). When the participants watch the light, it appears to move. The participants are then asked to estimate how far the dot of light moves. These estimates are made out loud, and with repeated trials, each group of three converges³ on an estimate. The main finding of the study was that groups found their own "social norm"⁴ of perception.

Asch believed that the main problem with Sherif's conformity experiment was that there was no correct answer to the ambiguous question of how far the dot of light was moving (because it wasn't moving at all - the movement was just an optical illusion). How could we be sure that a person conformed when there was no correct answer?

- [10] In 1951, Asch devised what is now regarded as a classic experiment in social psychology, whereby there was an obvious answer to a line judgment task.⁵ If the participant gave an incorrect answer it would be clear that this was due to group pressure.

Aim

Solomon Asch conducted an experiment to investigate the extent to which social pressure from a majority group could influence a person to conform.

Procedure

Asch used a lab experiment to study conformity, whereby 50 male students from Swarthmore College in the USA participated in a "vision test." Using a line judgment task, Asch put a naive⁶ participant in a room with seven confederates.⁷

The confederates had agreed in advance what their responses would be when presented with the line task. The real participant did not know this and was led to believe that the other seven participants were also real participants like themselves.

Each person in the room had to state aloud which comparison line (A, B or C) was most like the target line. The answer was always obvious. The real participant sat at the end of the row and gave his or her answer last.

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3. **Converge (verb):** to come together; to come from different places and meet at a particular spot
 4. "Social norm" refers to the rules of behavior that are considered acceptable in a group or society.
 5. The "line judgment task" refers to the experiment explained in paragraphs 3-4.
 6. **Naive (adjective):** clueless or oblivious; expecting things to be easier or people to be more honest or kind than they actually are
 7. Someone's confederates are the people they are working with in a secret activity; in this case, the confederates are "in" on the experiment.

- [15] There were 18 trials in total and the confederates gave the wrong answer on 12 trials (called the critical trials). Asch was interested to see if the real participant would conform to the majority view. Asch's experiment also had a control condition where there were no confederates, only a "real participant."

Results

Asch measured the number of times each participant conformed to the majority view. On average, about one third (32%) of the participants who were placed in this situation went along and conformed with the clearly incorrect majority on the critical trials.

Over the 12 critical trials about 75% of participants conformed at least once and 25% of participants never conformed. In the control group,⁸ with no pressure to conform to confederates, less than 1% of participants gave the wrong answer.

Conclusion

Why did the participants conform so readily? When they were interviewed after the experiment, most of them said that they did not really believe their conforming answers, but had gone along with the group for fear of being ridiculed⁹ or thought "peculiar." A few of them said that they really did believe the group's answers were correct.

Apparently, people conform for two main reasons: because they want to fit in with the group (normative influence) and because they believe the group is better informed than they are (informational influence).

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8. In an experiment, the "control group" is a group of participants similar to the treatment group, but they do not receive the treatment that's being studied (in this case, the other participants who are secretly in on the study). The control group's results are compared to the treatment group's results to determine the impact of the treatment.

9. **Ridicule (verb):** to make fun of someone in an unkind way; to criticize

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best states a central idea of the article? [RI.2]
 - A. Studies of conformity, like the Sherif and Asch experiments, show that individuals do not have as much control over their own actions as they may think.
 - B. Solomon Asch was an influential social psychologist who proved that human behavior is significantly impacted by groups.
 - C. The Asch experiment showed that people's individual perceptions can be influenced by the perceptions of a larger group.
 - D. Study subjects in the Asch experiment were tricked into believing that their peers were also participants, instead of confederates.

2. What is the author's purpose in using second-person point of view in Paragraphs 1-7? [RI.6]
 - A. Second-person point of view allows the reader to feel like they are involved in the experiment
 - B. Second-person point of view allows the reader to feel like they are removed from the experiment
 - C. Second-person point of view allows the author to explain his own opinions of the experiment
 - D. Second-person point of view allows the reader to feel close with the author

3. PART A: What does the word "ambiguous" mean as it is used in paragraph 9? [RI.4]
 - A. Having to do with motion
 - B. Scientific or exploratory
 - C. Unfair or one-sided
 - D. Unclear or inexact

4. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "the main problem with Sherif's conformity experiment" (Paragraph 9)
 - B. "there was no correct answer" (Paragraph 9)
 - C. "just an optical illusion" (Paragraph 9)
 - D. "a classic experiment in social psychology" (Paragraph 10)

5. Describe the similarities and differences between Sherif's conformity experiment and [RI.3] Asch's conformity experiment. Cite examples from the text in your response.

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. What was Asch trying to find out by conducting this experiment?
2. What conclusions can we draw about human behavior from the results of the line experiment? Explain your answer.
3. Have you ever been in a situation in which people conform? List examples from life.
4. Based on what you've learned about the Asch experiment, why do people follow the crowd? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other art, literature, or history in your answer.