

Asch's Conformity Study

From PsychWiki - A Collaborative Psychology Wiki

Solomon Asch set out to study social influences and how social forces affect a person's opinions and attitudes when he began his conformity study in the 1950's (Hock, 2005). After studying the works of Jean Martin Charcot, and subsequent psychologists, Asch noted that participants in these past studies often changed their differing opinions to those of the majorities, when confronted with opposing views (Asch, 1955). The conformity study that he subsequently designed tests whether or not one can change someone's judgment of a situation without changing their knowledge or assumptions about the situation (Asch, 1955).

Contents

- [1 Methodology](#)
- [2 Results](#)
- [3 Possible Explanations](#)
- [4 Variations on Size, Unanimity, and Accuracy](#)
- [5 Impact](#)
- [6 Criticisms](#)
- [7 Works Cited](#)

Methodology

Asch gathered seven to nine male college students for what he claimed was an experiment in visual perception (Asch, 1955). All were confederates but one, and when he entered the room, the others were already seated in a row (Hock, 2005). After taking his seat, the study began. The experimenter revealed two large white cards: one with a single line (the standard line) and one with three lines of differing lengths (the comparison lines). One of the three lines was the same size as the standard line, and the other two were of varying differences: from three quarters of an inch longer or shorter to one inch and three quarters longer or shorter. Participants were asked to verbally announce which of the three comparison lines was equal to the standard line (Asch, 1955). On the first two trials, the group unanimously answered correctly, but on the third trial, the confederates all gave the wrong answer (Asch, 1955). Each study had 18 trials, 12 of which the confederates gave unanimous incorrect answers (Asch, 1955). They gave correct answers occasionally so that the participant did not suspect collusion (Asch, 1955).

Results

Asch tested 123 different young men from three different institutions of higher learning (Asch, 1955). He found that when alone (the control group) participants made mistakes less than 1% of the time, but in the group situation described in methodology, participants made errors in line judgment 36.8% of the time (Asch, 1955). About one fourth of participants never submitted to the majority, whereas some individuals conformed almost every single time (Asch, 1955). Every participant that conformed to the majority underestimated the frequency of their conformity when interviewed later (Asch, 1955).

Possible Explanations

Participants were interviewed at the end of the study. Explanations given for participants' nonconformity included: confidence in one's own judgment or the obligation to stick to their answers (Asch, 1955). Conformists gave explanations such as: "I am wrong, they are right," "not to spoil your results," or the idea that something was wrong with them for seeing the answer differently, so they wished to hide this (Asch, 1955). Even those who conformed believed that, perhaps, the group members were simply "sheep" following the first to give an answer or that the members giving a wrong answer were seeing an optical illusion, yet they responded incorrectly with the majority anyway (Asch, 1955).

Variations on Size, Unanimity, and Accuracy

After completing the initial study, Asch conducted additional research to see if the size or unanimity of the majority was more important in influencing conformity (Asch, 1955).

One variation included only one confederate giving an incorrect answer and the participant, and this did nearly nothing to change the participants' answers, the participants answered independently in almost all of the trials (Asch, 1955). However, when there were two people giving incorrect answers along with the subject, subjects gave an incorrect answer 13.6% of the time (Asch, 1955). With three confederates answering incorrectly, participants gave erroneous answers 31.8% of the time (Asch, 1955). However, after any increase after three confederates did not result in a substantial increase in conformity; he found that size only had an effect up to a certain point (Asch, 1955).

When participants had a dissenting partner, their incorrect answers decreased to one fourth of the incorrect answers seen when the majority was unanimous (Asch, 1955). Then, the study was changed so that the partner joined the majority after six trials,

which resulted in the subject immediately increasing incorrect answers (Asch, 1955). Another variation on the partner condition occurred when the partner left the entire study after six trials (Asch, 1955). This way, the participant would not feel “deserted” by his partner when the partner switched to the other side (Asch, 1955). So, when the partner simply left the trial (with the excuse at the beginning that he had somewhere to be), errors increased, but not as much as when the partner switched to the majority (Asch, 1955).

Another test of unanimity occurred when the confederates started out on the first trial giving unanimous answers, and slowly broke away so that by the sixth trial the participant was the only one in the minority (Asch, 1955). The participant typically stayed true to his answers up until the point where he was completely alone and then conformity increased greatly (Asch, 1955).

Asch (1955) also manipulated the degree to which the majority was wrong. He tried to reach a point where the error was so blatantly obvious that the subject would certainly choose the correct answer despite the majority. However, when the difference between the correct line and the line chosen by the incorrect majority was as much as seven inches, some participants still went with the majority (Asch, 1955).

Impact

Asch’s research paved the way for many additional studies on conformity. Newer studies have shown that attraction and commitment to the group also increases conformity. Other studies have also explored the impact of shame (Scheff, 1988), age (Walker & Andrade, 1996), sex, cultural influences (Perrin & Spencer, 1981), information availability, social norms, and personal privacy among others on conformity (Hock, 2005).

Criticisms

Although Asch’s results have been upheld by many other studies, a common criticism is that it is difficult to generalize his results to real world situations (Hock, 2005). Critics believe that something as trivial as judging the length of a line in a laboratory does not relate to conformity on important real life issues. (Hock, 2005). Another criticism is that participant’s may be conforming to the expectations of the experimenter, not the group (Schulman, 1967).

Based on Perrin & Spencer’s results, as well as their own results that showed no conformity when the test stimuli were more ambiguous, Lionel G. Standing and Marie-France Lalancette argue that Asch’s results were merely a phenomenon rather than a stable characteristic of human behavior (Standing & Lalancette, 1990).