



Social Influence

A-level Revision Notes AQA(A)

Assessment Criteria

Types of conformity: internalisation, identification and compliance. Explanations for conformity: informational social influence and normative social influence, and variables affecting conformity including group size, unanimity and task difficulty as investigated by Asch.

Conformity to social roles as investigated by Zimbardo.

Explanations for obedience: agentic state and legitimacy of authority, and situational variables affecting obedience including proximity and location, as investigated by Milgram, and uniform. Dispositional explanation for obedience: the Authoritarian Personality.

Explanations of resistance to social influence, including social support and locus of control

Minority influence including reference to consistency, commitment and flexibility.

The role of social influence processes in social change.

Conformity / Majority Influence

Conformity is a type of social influence defined as a change in belief or behaviour in response to real or imagined social pressure. It is also known as majority influence.

Type of Conformity

Compliance (AO1)

This refers to instances where a person may agree in public with a group of people, but the person privately disagrees with the group's viewpoint or behaviour. The individual changes their views, but it is a temporary change.

For example, a person may laugh at a joke because their group of friends find it funny but deep down the person does not find the joke funny.

For a study on compliance refer to [Asch's Line Study](#).

Internalisation (AO1)

Publicly changing behaviour to fit in with the group while also agreeing with them privately. An internal (private) and external (public) change of behaviour. This is the deepest level of

conformity were the beliefs of the group become part of the individual's own belief system.

An example of internalisation is if someone lived with a vegetarian at university and then decides to also become one too because they agree with their friend's viewpoint / someone converting religions would also be a good example.

For a study on internalisation refer to Jenness (see below).

Identification (AO1)

Identification occurs when someone conforms to the demands of a given social role in society. For example, a policeman, teacher or politician. This type of conformity extends over several aspects of external behaviour. However, there still be no changed to internal personal opinion.

A good example is [Zimbardo's Prison Study](#).

AO2 Scenario Exam Question

Jan and Norah have just finished their first year at university where they lived in a house with six other students. All the other students were very health conscious and ate only organic food. Jan had listened to their point of view and now she also eats only organic food.

Norah was happy to eat organic food while in the house, but when she went home for the holidays she ate whatever her mother cooked. Both girls conformed, but for different reasons.

Explain which type of conformity each girl was showing.

(4 marks)

Answer

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“Jan shows internalisation. She has publicly and privately changed her attitudes and now permanently only eats organic food. Norah is showing compliance.

She only conformed publicly to her friends’ behaviour but had obviously not privately undergone attitude change to eating organic as she reverted to eating non-organic in the holidays.

Norah probably conformed to gain group approval and membership whereas Jan believed the other students to be ‘right’ in their belief that organic food was ‘good’.”

Explanations of Conformity

Normative Influence (AO1/AO3)

The **desire to be liked** – when we conform to **fit in** with the group because we don't want to appear foolish or be left out. For example, a person may feel pressurised to smoke because the rest of their friends are.

Normative influence tends to lead to **compliance** because the person smokes just for show but deep down they wish not to smoke. This means any change of behaviour is **temporary**.

For a study on normative influence refer to [Asch's Line Study](#).

Informational Influence (AO1/AO3)

The **desire to be right** – when we conform because we are **unsure of the situation** or **lack knowledge**, so we look to others who we believe may have more information than us. This explanation tends to lead to **internalisation**.

An example of this is if someone was to go to a posh restaurant for the first time, they may be confronted with several forks and not know which one to use, so they might look to a near by person to see what fork to use first.

For a study on informational influence refer to Jenness (see below).

Jenness' Bean Jar Experiment

Jenness carried out a study into conformity – in his experiment participants were asked to estimate how many beans they thought was in a jar. Each participant had to make an individual estimate, and then do the same as a group.

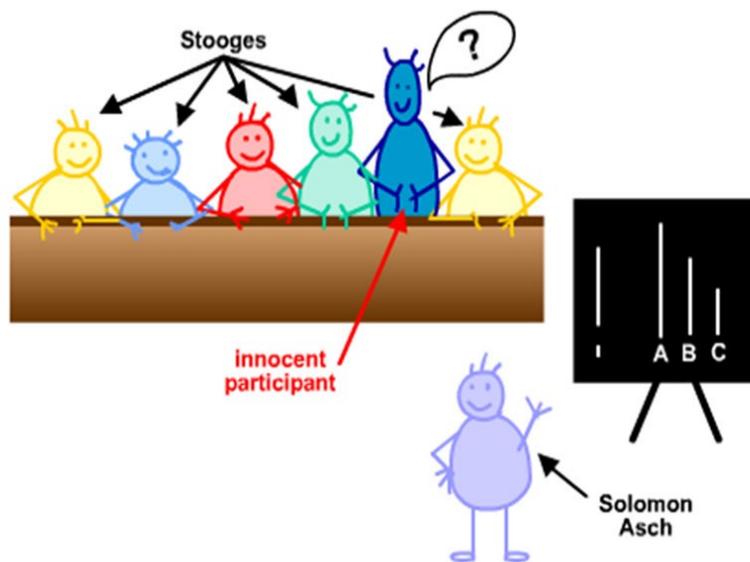
He found that when the task was carried out in a social group, the participants would report estimates of roughly the same value (even though they had previously reported quite different estimates as individuals).

The study was successful in showing majority influence, thus proving that individuals' behavior and beliefs can be influenced by a group. Additionally this is likely to be an example of informational social influence as participants would be uncertain about the actual number of beans in the jar.

Explanations of Conformity

Asch's Line Experiment (AO1)

Asch wanted to investigate whether people would conform in situations where an answer was obvious.



In Asch's study there were 5-7 participants per group. Each group was presented with a standard line and three comparison lines. Participants had to say aloud which comparison line matched the standard line in length. In each group there was only one real participant the remaining 6 were confederates. The confederates were told to give the incorrect answer on 12 out of 18 trials.

Real participants conformed on 32% of the critical trials where confederates gave the wrong answers.

Evaluation of Asch's Study (AO3)

- This study lacks ecological validity as it was based on peoples' perception of lines, this does not reflect the complexity of real-life conformity.
- There are also sampling issues regarding this study as the study was only carried out on men thus the sample was gender bias and therefore the results cannot be applied to females. The sample therefore lacks population validity.
- Moreover, there are ethical issues regarding Asch's study – Mention deception as participants were told the study was about perception of lines. As a result, they could not give informed consent. Furthermore, it is possible that the participants may have felt embarrassed when the true nature of the study was revealed. Thus, could potentially put them through some form of psychological harm. However, Asch did debrief at the end.
- For extra AO3 points link Asch's results to theories/reasons why people may conform to the majority. For instance, some participants said they conformed to fit in with the group, this claim coincides (supports) 'Normative influence' which states that people conform to fit in when privately disagreeing with the majority.

Factors Affecting Conformity (AO3)

In further trials, Asch (1952, 1956) changed the procedure (i.e., independent variables) to investigate which *situational factors* influenced the level of conformity (dependent variable). His results and conclusions are given below:

Group Size

Asch altered the number of confederates in his study to see how this effected conformity. The bigger the majority group (number of confederates), the more people conformed, but only up to a certain point.

With one other person (i.e., confederate) in the group conformity was 3%, with two others it increased to 13%, and with three or more it was 32% (or 1/3). However, conformity did not increase much after the group size was about 4/5. Because conformity does not seem to increase in groups larger than four, this is considered the optimal group size.

Brown and Byrne (1997) suggest that people might suspect collusion if the majority rises beyond three or four.

Group Unanimity

A person is more likely to conform when all members of the group agree and give the same answer. When one other person in the group gave a different answer from the others, and the group answer was not unanimous, conformity dropped. Asch (1951) found that even the presence of just one confederate that goes against the majority choice can reduce conformity as much as 80%.

Difficulty of Task

When the (comparison) lines (e.g., A, B, C) were made more similar in length it was harder to judge the correct answer and conformity increased. When we are uncertain, it seems we look to others for confirmation. The more difficult the task, the greater the conformity.

Answer in Private

When participants could answer in private (so the rest of the group does not know their response) conformity decreases. This is because there are fewer group pressures and normative influence is not as powerful, as there is no fear of rejection from the group.

Conformity to Social Roles

Social roles are the part people play as members of a social group (e.g. student, teacher, policeman etc). There is considerable pressure to conform to the expectations of a social role. Conforming to a social role is called identification.

Stanford Prison Experiment (AO1)

Procedure

To study the roles people play in prison situations, Zimbardo converted a basement of the Stanford University psychology building into a mock prison. He advertised for students to play the roles of prisoners and guards for a fortnight. Participants were randomly assigned to either the role of prisoner or guard in a simulated prison environment.

Prisoners were issued a uniform, and referred to by their number only. Guards were issued a khaki uniform, together with whistles, handcuffs and dark glasses, to make eye contact with prisoners impossible. The guards worked shifts of eight hours each (the other guards remained on call). No physical violence was permitted.

Stanford Prison Experiment (AO1)

Zimbardo observed the behaviour of the prisoners and guards (as a researcher), and also acted as prison warden.

Findings

Within a very short time both guards and prisoners were settling into their new roles, with the guards adopting theirs quickly and easily. Within hours of beginning the experiment some guards began to harass prisoners. They behaved in a brutal and sadistic manner, apparently enjoying it. Other guards joined in, and other prisoners were also tormented.

The prisoners soon adopted prisoner-like behaviour too. They talked about prison issues a great deal of the time. They 'told tales' on each other to the guards. They started taking the prison rules very seriously, and some even began siding with the guards against prisoners who did not obey the rules.

As the prisoners became more submissive, the guards became more aggressive and assertive. They demanded ever greater obedience from the prisoners. The prisoners were dependent on the guards for everything so tried to find ways to please the guards, such as telling tales on fellow prisoners.

Evaluation of Zimbardo's Study (AO3)

- Demand characteristics could explain the findings of the study. Most of the guards later claimed they were simply acting. Because the guards and prisoners were playing a role their behaviour may not be influenced by the same factors which affect behaviour in real life. This means the study's findings cannot be reasonably generalized to real life, such as prison settings
- A strength of the study is that it has altered the way US prisons are run. For example, juveniles accused of federal crimes are no longer housed before trial with adult prisoners (due to the risk of violence against them).
- The study has received many ethical criticisms, including lack of fully informed consent by participants as Zimbardo himself did not know what would happen in the experiment (it was unpredictable). Also, the prisoners did not consent to being 'arrested' at home.
- Another strength of the study is that the harmful treatment of participant led to the formal recognition of ethical guidelines. Studies must now gain ethical approval before they are conducted. An ethics committee review whether the potential benefits of the research are justifiable in the light of possible risk of physical or psychological harm.

Obedience

[Obedience](#) is a type of social influence where a person follows an order from another person who is usually an authority figure.

Milgram's Shock Study (AO1)

[Milgram](#) wanted to see whether people would obey a legitimate authority figure when given instructions to harm another human being.

Procedure

He conducted a lab experiment in which two participants were assigned either the role of a teacher (this was always given to the true participant) or learner (a confederate called Mr. Wallace).

The teacher and learner were put into separate rooms. The teacher was then asked by the experimenter (who wore a lab coat) to administer electric shocks (which were actually harmless) to the learner each time he gave the wrong answer. These shocks increased every time the learner gave a wrong answer, from 15 - 450 volts.

Milgram's Shock Study (AO1)

Procedure

The experimenter (Mr Williams) wore a grey lab coat and his role was to give a series of orders / prods when the participant refused to administer a shock. There were 4 prods and if one was not obeyed then the experimenter read out the next prod, and so on.

- Prod 1: please continue.
- Prod 2: the experiment requires you to continue.
- Prod 3: It is absolutely essential that you continue.
- Prod 4: you have no other choice but to continue.

Findings

The results were that all participants went to 300 volts and 65% were willing to go all the way to 450 volts. Milgram did more than one experiment – he carried out 18 variations of his study.

All he did was alter the situation (IV) to see how this affected obedience (DV). For example, when the experimenter instructed and prompted the teacher by telephone from another room, obedience fell to 20.5%.

Evaluation of Milgram's Study (AO3)

- A limitation is that this study lacked ecological validity as it was carried out in a lab under artificial conditions. This means that it might not be possible to generalise the finding to a real-life setting, as people do not usually receive orders to hurt another person in real life.
- Another problem is that the sample was biased. Milgram only used males in his study, and this means we cannot generalise the results to females.
- Highlight the value that Milgram's work has provided to social Psychology. For instance, Milgram's work gives an insight into why people under the Nazi reign were willing to kill Jews when given orders to do so. It also highlights how we can all be blind to obedience often doing things without question.
- A strength of the study is that it used a standardised procedure because it was a lab experiment. This is good because it improves the reliability of the study and also helps establish a causal relationship.

Ethical Issues of Milgram's Study (AO3)

- **Deception** – the participants actually believed they were shocking a real person, and were unaware the learner was a confederate of Milgram's. However, Milgram argued that “illusion is used when necessary in order to set the stage for the revelation of certain difficult-to-get-at-truths”. Milgram also interviewed participants afterwards to find out the effect of the deception. Apparently 83.7% said that they were “glad to be in the experiment”, and 1.3% said that they wished they had not been involved.
- **Protection of participants** - Participants were exposed to extremely stressful situations that may have the potential to cause psychological harm. Many of the participants were visibly distressed. Signs of tension included trembling, sweating, stuttering, laughing nervously, biting lips and digging fingernails into palms of hands. Full blown seizures were observed for 3 participants; one so violent that the experiment was stopped. In his defence, Milgram argued that these effects were only short term. Once the participants were debriefed (and could see the confederate was OK) their stress levels decreased. Milgram also interviewed the participants one year after the event and concluded that most were happy that they had taken part.

Explanations for Obedience

The Agentic State (AO3)

Agency theory says that people will obey an authority when they believe that the authority will take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. This is supported by some aspects of Milgram's evidence.

For example, when participants were reminded that they had responsibility for their own actions, almost none of them were prepared to obey. In contrast, many participants who were refusing to go on did so if the experimenter said that he would take responsibility'.

Another example of the agentic state involved a variation of Milgram's study whereby participants could instruct an assistant (confederate) to press the switches. In this condition 92.5% shocked to the maximum 450 volts.

Legitimacy of the Authority Figure (AO3)

People tend to obey others if they recognise their authority as morally right and / or legally based (i.e. legitimate). The experimenter has legitimate authority as he has scientific status.

Situational Factors (AO3)

The Milgram experiment was carried out many times whereby Milgram varied the basic procedure (changed the IV). By doing this Milgram could identify which **situational factors** affected obedience (the DV).

Obedience was measured by how many participants shocked to the maximum 450 volts (65% in the original study).

Status of Location

Milgram's obedience experiment was conducted at Yale, a prestigious university in America. The high status of the university gave the study credibility and respect in the eyes of the participants, thus making them more likely to obey.

When Milgram moved his experiment to a set of run-down offices rather than the impressive Yale University obedience dropped to 47.5%.

This suggests that status of location effects obedience.

Authority Figure Wearing a Uniform

Milgram's experimenter (Mr. Williams) wore a laboratory coat (a symbol of scientific expertise) which gave him a high status.

But when the experimenter dressed in everyday clothes obedience was very low. The uniform of the authority figure can give them status.

Proximity of Authority Figure

People are more likely to obey an authority figure who is in close proximity (i.e. nearby). In Milgram's study the experimenter was in the same room as the participant (i.e. teacher).

If the authority figure is distant it is easier to resist their orders. When the experimenter instructed and prompted the teacher by telephone from another room, obedience fell to 20.5%.

Many participants cheated and missed out shocks or gave less voltage than ordered to by the experimenter.

Dispositional Explanation: Authoritarian Personality (AO1/AO3)

Adorno felt that personality (i.e. dispositional) factors rather than situational (i.e. environmental) factors could explain obedience.

He proposed that there was such a thing as an authoritarian personality, i.e. a person who favours an authoritarian social system, and admires obedience to authority figures.

One of the various characteristics of the authoritarian personality was that the individual is hostile to those who are of inferior status, but obedient of people with high status.

Adorno believed that this was because the individual in question was not able to express hostility towards their parents (for being strict and critical). Consequently, the person would then displace this aggression / hostility onto safer targets, namely those who are weaker, such as ethnic minorities.

Exam Tip

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If you have an essay question on a dispositional explanation, describe the Authoritarian Personality theory and use the situational explanations (e.g. uniform) as criticism to the theory.

Resistance to Social Influence

Independent behaviour is a term that psychologists use to describe behaviour that seems not be influenced by other people. This happens when a person resists the pressures to conform or obey.

Social Support (AO1/AO3)

In one of Asch's experimental variations he showed that the presence of a dissident (a confederate who did not conform) led to a decrease in the conformity levels in true participants.

This is thought to be because the presence of a dissident gave the true participant social support and made them feel more confident in their own decision and more confident in rejecting the majority position.

Social support also decreases obedience to authority. In a variation of Milgram's study two other participants (confederates) were also teachers but refused to obey. Confederate 1 stopped at 150 volts and confederate 2 stopped at 210 volts. The presence of others who are seen to disobey the authority figure reduced the level of obedience to 10%.

Locus of Control (AO1/AO3)

The term 'Locus of control' refers to how much control a person feels they have in their own behaviour. A person can either have an internal locus of control or an external locus of control.

People with a high internal locus of control perceive (see) themselves as having a great deal of personal control over their behaviour and are therefore more likely to take responsibility for the way they behave. For example, I did well on the exams because I revised extremely hard.

In contrast a person with a high external locus of control perceive their behaviours as being a result of external influences or luck – e.g. I did well on the test because it was easy.

Research has shown that people with an internal locus of control tend to be less conforming and less obedient (i.e. more independent).

Rotter proposes that people with internal locus of control are better at resisting social pressure to conform or obey, perhaps because they feel responsible for their actions.

Minority Influence

Independent behaviour is a term that psychologists use to describe behaviour that seems not be influenced by other people. This happens when a person resists the pressures to conform or obey.

Consistency (A01/A03)

Moscovici stated that being consistent and unchanging in a view is more likely to influence the majority than if a minority is inconsistent and chops and changes their mind.

A distinction can be made between two forms of consistency:

- (a) **Diachronic Consistency** – i.e. consistency over time – the majority sticks to its guns, doesn't modify its views.
- (b) **Synchronic Consistency** – i.e. consistency between its members – all members agree and back each other up.

Consistency may be important because:

1. Confronted with a consistent opposition, members of the majority will sit up, take notice, and rethink their position (i.e. the minority focuses attention on itself).
2. A consistent minority disrupts established norms and creates uncertainty, doubt and conflict.

Moscovici's Slide Study (AO1)

Procedure

Moscovici conducted an experiment in which female participants were shown 36 blue slides of different intensity and asked to report the colours. There were two confederates (the minority) and four participants (the majority).

In the first part of the experiment the two confederates answered green for each of the 36 slides. They were totally consistent in their responses.

In the second part of the experiment they answered green 24 times and blue 12 times. In this case they were inconsistent in their answers. A control group was also used consisting of participants only – no confederates.

Findings

When the confederates were consistent in their answers about 8% of participants said the slides were green. When the confederates answered inconsistently about 1% of participants said the slides were green.

Commitment (A01/AO3)

When the majority is confronted with someone with self-confidence and dedication to take a popular stand and refuses to back own, they may assume that he or she has a point.

Flexibility (A01/AO3)

Some researchers have questioned whether consistency alone is enough for a minority to influence a majority. They argue that the key is how the majority interprets consistency. If the consistent minority are seen as inflexible, rigid, uncompromising and dogmatic, they will be unlikely to change the views of the majority. However, if they appear flexible and compromising, they are likely to be seen as less extreme, as more moderate, cooperative and reasonable. As a result, they will have a better chance of changing majority views.

Nemeth conducted an experiment using a mock (i.e. pretend) jury in which groups of three participants and one confederate had to decide on the amount of compensation to be given to the victim of a ski-lift accident. When the consistent minority (the confederate) argued for a very low amount and refused to change his position, he had no effect on the majority. However, when he compromised and moved some way towards the majority position, the majority also compromised and changed their view.

Social Change

Social change occurs when a whole society adopts a new belief or behaviour which then becomes widely accepted as the 'norm'. Social influence processes involved in social change include minority influence, internal locus of control and disobedience to authority.

Social change is usually a result of minority influence. This is when a small group of people (the minority) manage to persuade the majority to adopt their point of view.

This also links to independent behaviour, because the minority resists pressures to conform and/or obey. Usually the minority have an internal locus of control.

Moscovici found that **consistency** is the most important factor in deciding whether the minority are influential or not. This means that the minority must be clear on what they are asking for and not change their minds, or disagree amongst themselves. This creates uncertainty amongst the majority.

It has been found that once the minority begin to persuade people round to their way of thinking, a **snowball effect** begins to happen. This means that more and more people adopt the

minority opinion, until gradually the minority becomes the majority. At this point, the people who have not changed their opinion are the minority, and they will often conform to the majority view as a result of group pressures.

The majority opinion then becomes law, and people have to obey this law. Once this happens, the minority opinion has become the dominant position in society, and people do often not even remember where the opinion originated from. This is a process known as **crypto amnesia**.



Simply Psychology

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