Social Influence

A-level Revision Notes AQA(A)
by Saul Mcleod published 2017, updated April 21, 2018

Conformity / Majority Influence

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

Types of Conformity

Compliance AO1

This refers to instances where a person may agree in public with a group of people but the person actually privately disagrees with the group’s viewpoint or behavior. 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.

Internalisation AO1

Publicly changing behavior to fit in with the group while also agreeing with them privately. An internal (private) and external (public) change of behavior. 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 friends 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 behavior. However, there still be no changed to internal personal opinion.

A good example is Zimbardo’s prison study.

Explanations for 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 behavior is temporary.

For a study on normative influence refer to Asch.

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 AO1

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.

Variables Affecting Conformity

Asch’s Line Study AO1

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

Procedure: 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 true participant the remaining 6 were confederates. The confederates were told to give the incorrect answer on 12 out of 18 trails.

Results: True participants conformed on 32% of the critical trials where confederates gave the wrong answers. Additionally 75% of the sample conformed to the majority on at least one trial.

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
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.

According to Hogg & Vaughan (1995), the most robust finding is that conformity reaches its full extent with 3-5 person majority, with additional members having little effect.

Group Unanimity

A person is more likely to conform when all members of the groups are in agreement 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.
When participants were allowed to 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**

Zimbardo wanted to investigate how readily people would conform to the social roles of guard and prisoner in a role-playing exercise that simulated prison life.

**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.

Zimbardo observed the behavior 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 behavior 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 behavior may not be influenced by the same factors which affect behavior in real life. This means the studies findings cannot be reasonably generalized to real life, such as prison settings. I.e the study has low ecological validity.

• The study may also lack population validity as the sample comprised US male students. The studies findings cannot be applied to female prisons or those from other countries. For example, America is an individualist culture (were people are generally less conforming) and the results maybe different in collectivist cultures (such as Asian countries).

• 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.

• Also, participants playing the role of prisoners were not protected from psychological harm, experiencing incidents of humiliation and distress. For example, one prisoner had to be released after 36 hours because of uncontrollable bursts of screaming, crying and anger. However, in Zimbardo’s defence the emotional distress experienced by the prisoners could not have been predicted from the outset. In addition Zimbardo did conduct debriefing sessions for several years afterwards and concluded they were no lasting negative effects.

• 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. They may request researchers make changes to the studies design or procedure, or in extreme cases deny approval of the study altogether.

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**Obedience**

Obedience is a type of social influence where a person follows an order from another person who is usually an authority figure.

**Explanations for Obedience**

**Milgram’s Shock Study AO1**

Milgram wanted to know why Germans were willing to kill Jews during the Holocaust. He thought that it might have been because German’s were just evil. He thought that
Americans were different and would not have followed such orders. To test this ‘German’s are different’ hypothesis he carried out this study (outlined below).

**Procedure:** Milgram wanted to see whether people would obey a legitimate authority figure when given instructions to harm another human being.

To test this he created a set up 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.

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.

**Results:** 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 generalised the results to females.

- Furthermore 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 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. Three participants had uncontrollable seizures, and many pleaded to be allowed to stop the experiment.

  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.

  However, Milgram did **debrief** the participants fully after the experiment and also followed up after a period of time to ensure that they came to no harm.

**The Agentic State**

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 agenetic 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. This shows when there is less personal responsibility obedience increases.

### Legitimacy of Authority Figure

People tend to obey others if they recognise their authority as morally right and / or legally based (i.e. legitimate). This response to legitimate authority is learned in a variety of situations, for example in the family, school and workplace.

With regard to Milgram' study the experimenter is seen as having legitimate authority as he has scientific status.

### Situational Factors

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).

### 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.

### 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.

### Proximity of Authority Figure

People are more likely be 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 resistant 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

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 in particular 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.

Resistance to Social Influence

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

Social Support

In one of Asch’s variation 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’ 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

The term ‘Locus of control’ refers to how much control a person feels they have in their own behavior. 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 behavior 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 behaviors 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

Minority influence occurs when a small group (minority) influences the opinion of a much larger group (majority). This can happen when the minority behaves in the following ways.

Consistency

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.

Procedure: Moscovici conducted an experiment in which female participants were shown 36 blue slides of different intensity and asked to report the colors. 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.

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. This can lead to the majority taking the minority view seriously. The majority will therefore be more likely to question their own views.

Commitment

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

A number of researchers have questioned whether consistency alone is sufficient for a minority to influence a majority. They argue that the key is how the majority interprets
Some researchers have gone further and suggested that it is not just the appearance of flexibility and compromise which is important but actual flexibility and compromise. This possibility was investigated by Nemeth.

Their experiment was based on a mock 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.

This experiment questions the importance of consistency. The minority position changed, it was not consistent, and it was this change that apparently resulted in minority influence.

Social Change

Social change occurs when a whole society adopts a new belief or behavior 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 behavior, 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.
## Assessment Objectives

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<th>AO1</th>
<th>Knowledge and understanding</th>
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<td>(a) recognise, recall and show understanding of scientific knowledge</td>
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<td>(b) select, organise and communicate relevant information in a variety of forms</td>
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<th>AO2</th>
<th>Application of knowledge</th>
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<td>(a) analyse and evaluate scientific knowledge and processes</td>
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<td>(b) apply scientific knowledge and processes to unfamiliar situations including those related to issues</td>
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<td>(c) assess the validity, reliability and credibility of scientific information</td>
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<th>AO3</th>
<th>How Science Works (Research Methods)</th>
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<td>(a) describe ethical, safe and skilful practical techniques and processes, selecting appropriate qualitative and quantitative methods</td>
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<td>(b) know how to make, record and communicate reliable and valid observations and measurements with appropriate precision and accuracy, through using primary and secondary sources</td>
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<td>(c) analyse, interpret, explain and evaluate the methodology, results and impact of their own and others’ experimental and investigative activities in a variety of ways.</td>
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