

A-LEVEL PSYCHOLOGY REVISION NOTES

---

# **Social Influence**

AQA Psychology 7181 (AS) and 7182 (A-level)

2025 specification · spec sections 3.1.1 (AS) and 4.1.1 (A-level)

# Contents

1. **Types of Conformity**
2. **Explanations for Conformity (NSI and ISI)**
3. **Variables Affecting Conformity (Asch)**
4. **Obedience: Milgram's Research**
5. **Explanations for Obedience (Agentic State and Legitimacy of Authority)**
6. **Situational Variables Affecting Obedience**
7. **Dispositional Explanation: The Authoritarian Personality**
8. **Resistance to Social Influence**
9. **Minority Influence**

**How to use these notes.** Social Influence content is identical for AS and A-level. Key terms are in **bold**; tables summarise variables and evidence; "exam tip" boxes call out common errors. Studies are presented with procedure → findings → evaluation.

*Note on the 2025 specification:* Identification (Kelman's third type of conformity), Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment, and social influence in social change were removed from the 2025 spec and are not covered in these notes.

## AQA 2025 SPECIFICATION — SOCIAL INFLUENCE CONTENT

- **Types of conformity:** internalisation and compliance. **Explanations for conformity:** informational social influence (ISI) and normative social influence (NSI). **Variables affecting conformity** including group size, unanimity and task difficulty as investigated by Asch.
- **Explanations for obedience:** agentic state and legitimacy of authority. **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.

# 1 Types of Conformity

## WHAT IS CONFORMITY?

**Conformity** is a type of **social influence** — yielding to group pressure, leading to a change in a person's behaviour or opinion as a result of *real or imagined* pressure from a person or group. Also called **majority influence**.

## Kelman (1958): Two Types of Conformity

Type	Description	Linked to
<b>Internalisation</b>	The <i>deepest</i> level of conformity. The person publicly <b>AND</b> privately accepts the group's views as their own. The change is permanent and lasts even when the group is no longer present.	Usually driven by <b>informational social influence (ISI)</b> .
<b>Compliance</b>	The <i>weakest</i> level of conformity. The person agrees publicly with the group to gain approval or avoid disapproval, but privately disagrees. The change is temporary and stops when group pressure is removed.	Usually driven by <b>normative social influence (NSI)</b> .

## WORKED EXAMPLE

**Jan** moves into a house with vegetarian friends and stops eating meat. When she goes home for the holidays, she *still* doesn't eat meat — this is **internalisation** (private + public change).

**Norah** in the same house also doesn't eat meat — but when she goes home for the holidays she eats whatever her mother cooks. This is **compliance** (public change only, no private acceptance).

## EXAM TIP — DEPTH OF CONFORMITY

When asked to identify the type of conformity from a scenario, look for evidence of whether the behaviour *persists in the group's absence*. If yes → internalisation. If no → compliance. Identification was removed from the 2025 spec and should not feature in your answer.

## 2 Explanations for Conformity

Deutsch and Gerard (1955) proposed a **two-process model** with two main explanations of why people conform.

### Normative Social Influence (NSI)

NSI is driven by the desire to **be liked** and accepted by a group. People conform to gain approval or avoid rejection, even when they privately disagree.

- Usually leads to **compliance** — a public change only.
- Often emotional, based on fear of standing out or being ridiculed.
- Strongest in **group situations with strangers** (fear of social rejection is high) and when participants feel concern for social approval (**nAffiliators** conform more).

#### REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE

A teenager starts smoking to fit in with their friends, even though they don't enjoy smoking. They are unlikely to smoke when alone — the change is temporary and driven by NSI.

### Informational Social Influence (ISI)

ISI is driven by the desire to be **right**. People conform because they believe others have better information or expertise, especially in **ambiguous, novel or difficult situations**.

- Usually leads to **internalisation** — a permanent change in private belief.
- Most powerful when the situation is **ambiguous** (the right answer is unclear), in **crisis** situations, or when others are perceived as **experts**.

#### REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE

In a posh restaurant for the first time, a diner notices that everyone uses the fork on the outside of the plate first. Uncertain of the etiquette, they follow suit — and afterwards adopt this as the "correct" way. ISI → internalisation.

## Supporting Evidence (AO3)

Study	Evidence
<b>Asch (1956) — variations</b>	When participants were allowed to <b>write</b> their answers privately, conformity dropped substantially — supports NSI (no public pressure).
<b>Lucas et al. (2006)</b>	Participants conformed more to incorrect maths answers when the problems were <b>difficult</b> (ambiguous), supporting ISI.
<b>Fein et al. (2007)</b>	Participants changed their views on a US presidential candidate when they saw others' reactions during a televised debate — supports ISI (looking to others for what is "right").
<b>McGhee &amp; Teevan (1967)</b>	Students who scored high on "need for affiliation" (nAffiliators) conformed more — supports the role of NSI in conformity.

## Evaluation

**Strength — research support for NSI (validity).** A key strength of the two-process model is supporting evidence for NSI from Asch's (1956) own variations. When participants were allowed to write their answers privately rather than say them aloud, conformity dropped substantially. This matters because removing the *public* element of the response also removes the fear of social disapproval — exactly the mechanism Deutsch and Gerard claimed drives NSI. The fact that conformity falls only when the social cost of dissent is reduced therefore supports the validity of NSI as a genuine psychological process behind compliance.

**Strength — research support for ISI (validity).** A further strength is evidence for ISI from Lucas et al. (2006), who found that participants conformed more to incorrect group answers when maths problems were difficult than when they were easy. This supports the claim that ISI operates most strongly when the situation is ambiguous, because participants who lack confidence defer to the group as a source of "right" information. This strengthens the validity of the two-process model because it shows conformity rates vary in exactly the pattern the model predicts — confirming ISI as a distinct, situationally-triggered process.

**Limitation — NSI and ISI are not always distinguishable.** A major limitation is that the two processes often operate simultaneously and cannot be cleanly separated. Asch's dissenter variation reduced conformity from 32% to 5.5%, but the dissenter provides *both* social support (reducing NSI) *and* an alternative answer (reducing ISI). This means the model may be oversimplified, because real conformity situations are likely a blend of normative *and* informational pressure rather than one or the other. This weakens the explanatory power of the two-process model as a complete account of conformity.

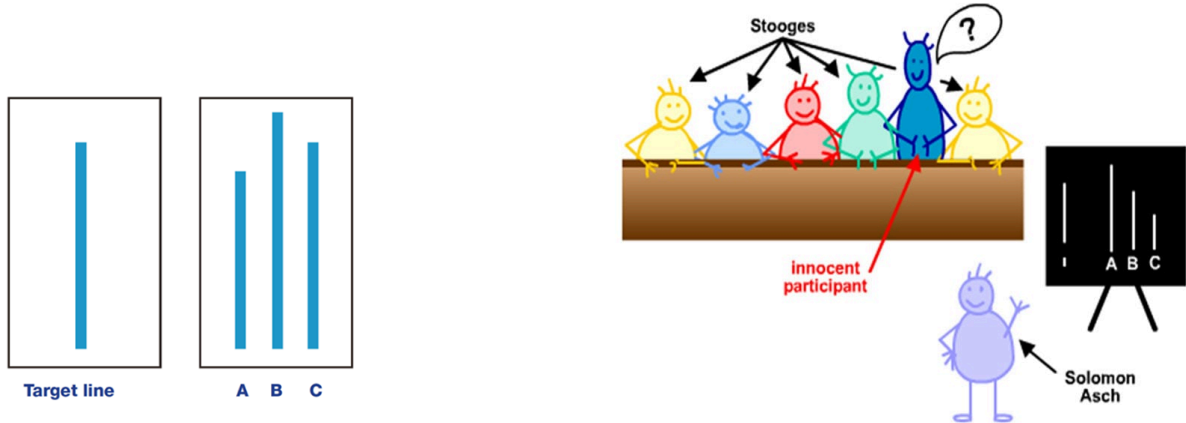
**Limitation — individual differences (interactionist alternative).** A further limitation is that NSI cannot account for dispositional variation. McGhee and Teevan (1967) found that students high in "need for affiliation" (nAffiliators) conformed more than low nAffiliators in identical conditions. This is a problem for a purely situational model, because the same group pressure produces different conformity rates depending on personality. An **interactionist** view — situational pressure combined with dispositional susceptibility — therefore offers a more complete explanation than Deutsch and Gerard's binary model alone.

**Application — real-world value (and the economy).** The two-process model has clear practical value in designing **social-norms interventions**. Schools and universities have used corrected-norms messaging (e.g. "Most students here do not binge drink") to weaponise NSI in reverse and reduce harmful behaviours, while

public-health campaigns during COVID-19 leveraged ISI by foregrounding expert consensus on vaccination. These interventions reduce healthcare costs and absenteeism, illustrating that NSI/ISI research delivers measurable economic benefits — a strong argument for its continued application.

### 3 Variables Affecting Conformity (Asch)

#### Asch's Line Study (1951, 1956) — Baseline



The line stimuli — participants chose which of A, B, C matched the standard.

The group setting — the real participant answered last or second-to-last, after the confederates.

Feature	Detail
<b>Aim</b>	To investigate the extent to which people would conform to a majority answer that was clearly wrong.
<b>Participants</b>	123 male American undergraduates, in groups of 6–8.
<b>Procedure</b>	The real participant sat with 5–7 confederates. They were shown a standard line and three comparison lines (A, B, C) and asked aloud which matched the standard line in length. The real participant always answered last (or second-to-last). Confederates were instructed to give the same wrong answer on <b>12 of 18 trials</b> (the critical trials).
<b>Findings</b>	<b>36.8%</b> of responses on critical trials conformed to the wrong answer. <b>75%</b> conformed at least once. <b>25%</b> never conformed. In a control trial (no confederates), error rate was <b>under 1%</b> .
<b>Conclusion</b>	People conform to a majority even when the answer is clearly incorrect — primarily through NSI (fear of social disapproval).

## Variables Affecting Conformity (Asch's Variations)

Variable	Effect	Why?
<b>Group size</b>	Conformity rose with group size up to <b>3 confederates</b> (32%). Adding more confederates beyond 3–4 had little extra effect. With only 1 confederate, conformity was very low (~3%).	A majority of 3 is enough to exert strong pressure. Beyond that, additional members give diminishing returns — Hogg & Vaughan call this the "optimal group size".
<b>Unanimity</b>	When one confederate broke ranks and gave the correct answer, conformity dropped from <b>32% to 5.5%</b> . Even a confederate giving a <i>different</i> wrong answer reduced conformity to ~9%.	Breaking unanimity removes the perception that the group is right. A single dissenter gives the participant social support to resist NSI.
<b>Task difficulty</b>	When the comparison lines were made more similar in length (so the correct answer was less obvious), conformity <b>increased</b> .	When the task is ambiguous, participants look to others for the "right" answer — ISI becomes the dominant mechanism.

## Evaluation of Asch's Research

**Strength — high internal validity (controlled lab method).** A key strength of Asch's research is the level of experimental control achieved in the lab. By standardising the line stimuli, group size, seating order and confederate responses, Asch was able to isolate the effect of group pressure on the dependent variable. This is important because it allows a clear cause-and-effect inference — the 36.8% conformity rate in critical trials versus under 1% errors in the control trial can be directly attributed to group pressure. This therefore supports the validity of Asch's claim that majority influence is a genuine cause of conformity, not an artefact of guesswork or task difficulty.

**Limitation — lacks mundane realism (external validity).** However, a counterpoint to this internal validity is that the task — judging which of three lines matches a standard — lacks mundane realism. Real-world conformity pressures usually involve morally or emotionally significant decisions, such as group dissent at work or jury deliberation. This matters because the trivial, unambiguous line-judging task may not generalise to high-stakes situations where conformity has real costs. Therefore, while Asch's study has strong internal validity, its ecological validity is limited and the 36.8% conformity rate may not reflect everyday social influence.

**Limitation — culturally biased sample (generalisability).** A further limitation is that Asch used 123 male American undergraduates — a WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) and individualist sample. Smith and Bond's (1996) meta-analysis found markedly higher conformity rates in collectivist cultures (e.g. 58% in China) than in individualist cultures (e.g. 25% in the USA). This is an example of cultural bias — specifically, an imposed etic — because Asch assumed his findings would generalise universally. It therefore suggests Asch's results may reflect the values of 1950s individualist America rather than universal human psychology.

**Limitation — temporal validity.** Asch's findings may also lack temporal validity. Perrin and Spencer (1980) repeated the procedure in 1980s Britain with engineering students and found only 1 conforming response in 396 trials. This is a problem because if conformity rates depend on the historical climate — the McCarthy-era 1950s being uniquely conformist — then Asch's findings are an "era effect" rather than a stable psychological phenomenon. This further restricts the generalisability of the original results to modern populations.

**Limitation — ethical issues.** Asch's research also raises ethical concerns under the BPS Code of Ethics. Participants were deceived about the true purpose of the study (told it was a "visual perception" task), and many reported significant distress at being "the odd one out". On a cost–benefit analysis the deception may be justifiable, because informed consent would have invalidated the procedure entirely, but the lack of fully-informed consent and protection from psychological harm remain genuine ethical limitations. This is particularly relevant given the artificial nature of the task — the scientific gain is modest, weakening the cost–benefit defence.

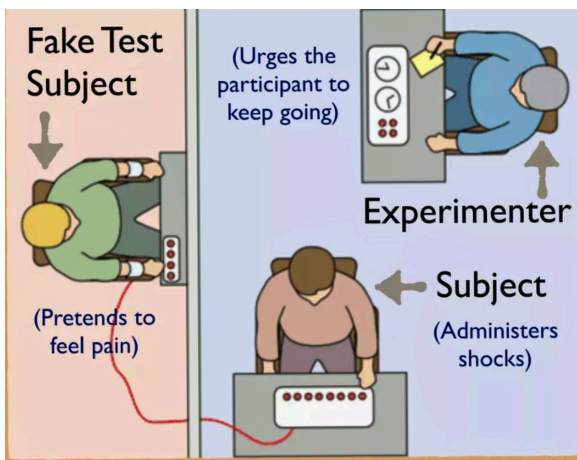
**Counter — strong support for the two-process model.** Despite these limitations, a strength of Asch's variations is that they map cleanly onto Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) two-process model. The unanimity and group-size variations support **NSI** (social pressure mechanisms), while the task-difficulty variation supports **ISI** (informational mechanisms in ambiguous situations). This convergence between Asch's findings and a theoretically derived model strengthens the construct validity of both — the variations are not just descriptive, they confirm specific mechanisms by which majority influence operates.

# 4 Obedience: Milgram's Research

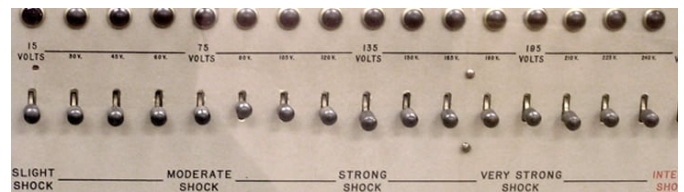
## OBEDIENCE

**Obedience** is a form of social influence in which a person follows a direct order from an **authority figure**. Unlike conformity, obedience involves an *explicit instruction* from someone perceived as having power.

### Milgram (1963) — Baseline Study



Milgram's experimental setup — the teacher (real participant) administered shocks at the experimenter's instruction; the learner (confederate) was in the next room.



The shock generator — 30 switches from 15 V ("Slight") to 450 V ("XXX"). No real shocks were delivered.

Feature	Detail
<b>Aim</b>	To investigate why ordinary Germans had obeyed orders to kill Jews during the Holocaust — specifically, to test whether Americans would do the same. He wanted to challenge the "Germans are different" hypothesis.
<b>Participants</b>	40 male volunteers aged 20–50, recruited via newspaper advert in New Haven, USA. Paid \$4.50 for participation.
<b>Setting</b>	Yale University psychology lab (high-status institution).
<b>Procedure</b>	The real participant was always assigned the role of "teacher" by a rigged draw. The "learner" was a confederate (Mr Wallace, a 47-year-old accountant). The teacher was told to administer increasingly severe electric shocks (15–450 volts) every time the learner gave a wrong answer to a memory task. At 300 V the learner pounded the wall and went silent. The experimenter (in a grey lab coat) used four <b>verbal prods</b> to encourage continuation: <i>"Please continue"</i> , <i>"The experiment requires that you continue"</i> , <i>"It is absolutely essential that you continue"</i> , <i>"You have no other choice, you must go on"</i> .
<b>Findings</b>	<b>100%</b> went to at least 300 V. <b>65%</b> went to the maximum 450 V (labelled "Danger: Severe Shock", "XXX"). Many showed signs of severe stress — sweating, trembling, nervous laughter; three had uncontrollable seizures.
<b>Conclusion</b>	Under the right situational pressures, ordinary people are willing to obey orders to harm others.

## Ethical Issues with Milgram's Research

**Deception** — participants believed they were giving real electric shocks; in fact, no shocks were delivered. Milgram argued the deception was necessary to study obedience genuinely; he claimed 84% of debriefed participants said they were "glad to have taken part".

**Lack of protection from harm** — many participants showed severe psychological distress. Three suffered seizures.

**Right to withdraw** — the experimenter's verbal prods made it difficult for participants to withdraw. However, Milgram argued they always retained the choice (and 35% did refuse to go to 450 V).

**Debriefing** — Milgram fully debriefed participants and followed up one year later; he found no evidence of long-term harm.

## Evaluation of Milgram's Research

**Strength — cross-cultural and temporal replication (generalisability).** A major strength of Milgram's research is that the findings have been replicated across cultures and time periods. Mantell (1971) found 85% obedience in a German replication, and Burger (2009) found 70% obedience in a partial ethical replication 45 years later in the USA. This matters because it suggests the obedience effect is not specific to 1960s American culture but reflects a robust situational mechanism. The temporal and cross-cultural consistency therefore strengthens the validity of Milgram's claim that ordinary people will obey destructive orders under the right situational conditions.

**Strength — real-world relevance (application + validity).** Further support comes from real-world studies of obedience to authority. Hofling et al. (1966) found that 21 of 22 nurses obeyed an unknown doctor's phone instruction to administer a dangerous drug overdose, despite this clearly violating hospital protocol. This is

important because it counters the criticism that Milgram's effect is a lab artefact — obedience to perceived legitimate authority is observable in genuine professional settings with real consequences. This therefore extends the external validity of Milgram's findings and supports his broader claim that destructive obedience occurs whenever a legitimate authority figure issues orders.

**Limitation — internal validity (demand characteristics).** A significant limitation concerns the internal validity of Milgram's procedure. Orne and Holland (1968) argued that participants "saw through" the deception and behaved as they thought the experimenter wanted, while Perry's (2012) archival research of Milgram's tapes found many participants explicitly doubted the shocks were genuine. This matters because if participants were responding to demand characteristics rather than genuine moral conflict, the 65% obedience rate overstates true destructive obedience. This therefore weakens Milgram's claim to have demonstrated authentic obedience under authority pressure.

**Counterpoint — real-shock replication.** However, a counterpoint comes from Sheridan and King (1972), who replicated Milgram using *genuine* electric shocks delivered to a puppy. 54% of males and 100% of females obeyed to the maximum voltage, despite the suffering being visibly real. This is crucial because the obedience effect persisted when there could be no doubt about the harm being inflicted, meaning the original 65% cannot simply be dismissed as participants "playing along". This restores confidence in the validity of Milgram's findings and suggests the underlying obedience mechanism is genuine.

**Limitation — sample bias and androcentrism (generalisability).** A further limitation is Milgram's sample of 40 male American volunteers aged 20–50, recruited through a newspaper advert in New Haven. This produces both **androcentrism** (only male behaviour was studied, then assumed to generalise) and **volunteer bias** (those who respond to newspaper adverts may differ in personality from the wider population). This is important because it limits the population validity of the 65% figure — although Blass (1999) found no consistent gender difference across later replications, the original conclusions cannot strictly be applied to women, non-Westerners or non-volunteers without additional evidence.

**Limitation — ethical issues (cost–benefit).** Milgram's research also raises serious ethical concerns under the BPS Code of Ethics: deception (no real shocks), inadequate right to withdraw (the verbal prods discouraged refusal), and lack of protection from harm (three participants suffered uncontrollable seizures). However, Milgram argued the deception was necessary because informed consent would have destroyed the procedure, and he fully debriefed participants — 84% later said they were "glad to have taken part" and follow-up showed no long-term harm. On a strict cost–benefit analysis the scientific and historical insight into the Holocaust may justify the procedure, but the study remains a key reference point in discussions of socially sensitive research.

**Conclusion.** Overall, despite ethical and internal-validity concerns, the convergence of cross-cultural replications, real-world parallels and the Sheridan and King replication means Milgram's research remains a robust demonstration that situational pressures can produce destructive obedience in ordinary people.

## 5 Explanations for Obedience

### Agentic State

The **agentic state** refers to an individual **relinquishing their personal autonomy and moral sense of right and wrong** in order to submit to obedience. In this state, a person sees themselves as an *agent* carrying out the wishes of an authority figure rather than acting on their own conscience. This can result in following orders even when the person knows them to be harmful to others. It is a **situational** explanation of obedience and was displayed by some participants in Milgram's research.

The opposite state is the **autonomous state** — acting on personal conscience and accepting responsibility for one's own behaviour.

#### AGENTIC SHIFT

The move from autonomous to agentic state is called the **agentic shift**. It is often accompanied by **moral strain** — the discomfort the person feels when their behaviour conflicts with their personal values. The agentic state allows them to bear the strain by attributing responsibility to the authority figure.

### Evaluation of the agentic state

**Strength — supporting evidence from Milgram's variations.** A key strength of the agentic state explanation is direct experimental support from Milgram's own variations. When the real participant only had to instruct a confederate to press the shock switch (rather than pressing it themselves), obedience to 450 V rose to 92.5%. Conversely, when participants were reminded they were *personally responsible*, obedience dropped sharply. This is important because it shows obedience scales precisely with how readily a person can shift responsibility onto the authority figure — the exact prediction the agentic state explanation makes. This therefore strengthens the validity of Milgram's claim that the agentic shift is a genuine psychological mechanism.

**Limitation — cannot explain all obedience (Mandel 1998).** However, a major limitation is that the agentic state cannot account for all destructive obedience. Mandel (1998) describes how the German Reserve Police Battalion 101 shot Polish Jewish civilians despite *not* being directly ordered to and being explicitly told they could opt out of the duty. This matters because if these men obeyed without an authority command and without an opportunity to shift responsibility, the obedience cannot be explained by the agentic shift. This therefore weakens the agentic state as a complete explanation and supports the view that other factors — dispositional or ideological — also drive destructive obedience.

**Limitation — the "obedience alibi" (ethical implications).** A further criticism, also from Mandel, is that the agentic state risks providing perpetrators with an obedience alibi — the "just following orders" defence used at the Nuremberg trials. This is a problem of **socially sensitive research**: by framing destructive obedience as a situational reflex rather than a moral choice, the explanation risks excusing those who commit atrocities. This is an important ethical-implications point because how psychologists explain behaviour shapes how society assigns moral and legal responsibility.

## Legitimacy of Authority

---

People are more likely to obey those they perceive to have **legitimate authority** — a recognised right to exercise power within a social hierarchy. We are socialised from childhood to respect those higher in the hierarchy (parents, teachers, police, doctors).

Legitimacy is increased by:

- Visible symbols of authority (uniforms, titles, institutional setting).
- The institutional context (a hospital, a university, a military base).
- Cultural endorsement of the role.

### Evaluation of legitimacy of authority

**Strength — supporting field evidence (Bickman 1974).** A major strength of the legitimacy-of-authority explanation comes from Bickman's (1974) New York field experiment. Confederates dressed as security guards gained 76% obedience from passers-by (to instructions like "Pick up that litter"), compared with only 19% for those in everyday clothes. This is important because it demonstrates the legitimacy effect operates outside the lab and with no deception about the situation, increasing ecological validity. It therefore supports the claim that visible symbols of authority — particularly uniforms — confer the perceived right to issue orders and produce real obedience.

**Strength — explains real-world atrocities (application).** A further strength is the explanation's ability to make sense of real-world destructive obedience, such as the My Lai massacre (1968) in which US soldiers killed hundreds of Vietnamese civilians under direct orders from Lieutenant Calley. The military command structure provides exactly the conditions the theory predicts — a recognised hierarchy, cultural endorsement of the role and visible symbols of authority (rank, uniform, weapons). This is important because it shows the explanation has historical and applied value, extending beyond the lab to events of major moral significance.

**Limitation — cross-cultural variation.** A limitation, however, is that the strength of the legitimacy effect varies across cultures. Kilham and Mann (1974) found only 16% obedience in an Australian replication of Milgram, while Mantell (1971) found 85% in Germany. This is important because if legitimacy were a universal feature of authority, replications should produce similar obedience rates. The wide cross-cultural range suggests that cultural attitudes to authority — collectivist deference vs individualist questioning — moderate the effect, meaning the theory needs to specify the cultural conditions under which legitimacy produces obedience.

**Limitation — cannot fully explain dissent.** A further limitation is that legitimacy of authority cannot easily explain why 35% of Milgram's participants *refused* to obey to 450 V in the baseline condition. The experimenter's legitimacy was identical for all participants, yet some defied him. This is important because it shows legitimacy alone cannot account for individual variation — dispositional factors such as the **Authoritarian Personality** (see Section 7) and **locus of control** (see Section 8) must also be considered. An interactionist view — situational legitimacy plus dispositional susceptibility — therefore provides a more complete account of obedience.

#### EXAM TIP

The agentic state and legitimacy of authority work **together**. Legitimacy provides the social conditions (a recognised hierarchy) in which the agentic shift is most likely. Strong answers explain how the two interact — not just list them as separate explanations.

## 6 Situational Variables Affecting Obedience

Milgram conducted **18 variations** of his baseline procedure, each altering one feature of the situation to see how obedience changed. The three variables on the AQA spec are **proximity**, **location** and **uniform**.

### 1. Proximity

Condition	% obeying to 450 V
<b>Baseline</b> (teacher and learner in adjacent rooms; experimenter in same room as teacher)	65%
<b>Same room</b> (teacher and learner in same room)	40%
<b>Touch proximity</b> (teacher had to force learner's hand onto shock plate)	30%
<b>Remote authority</b> (experimenter gave orders by telephone from another room)	20.5%

**Conclusion:** Closer proximity to the *victim* reduces obedience (visible consequences harder to ignore). Closer proximity to the *authority figure* increases obedience (legitimacy is reinforced).

### 2. Location

Condition	% obeying to 450 V
<b>Baseline (Yale University)</b>	65%
<b>Rundown office building in Bridgeport, Connecticut</b>	47.5%

**Conclusion:** High-status settings confer **legitimacy** on the procedure and the authority figure. Without that institutional backing, obedience falls. Note that 47.5% is still substantial — situational pressures remain even in a less prestigious setting.

### 3. Uniform

Condition	% obeying to 450 V
<b>Baseline (experimenter in grey lab coat)</b>	65%
<b>Experimenter in everyday clothes</b>	20%

**Conclusion:** A uniform is a visible symbol of legitimate authority. Removing it reduces the perception that the experimenter has the right to give the orders.

## Evaluation

---

**Strength — high internal validity through experimental control.** A major strength of Milgram's situational research is the systematic control across his 18 variations. By changing only *one* variable at a time (e.g. proximity, location or uniform), while holding the rest of the procedure constant, Milgram could attribute changes in obedience directly to that variable. This is important because it allows clear causal inference — the drop from 65% to 47.5% when the study moved to a rundown office in Bridgeport can confidently be attributed to location, not chance. This therefore strengthens the validity of the situational claim that environmental cues shape obedience.

**Strength — supporting field replication (Bickman 1974).** A further strength is independent support from outside the lab. Bickman's (1974) New York field experiment found 76% obedience to confederates in a security-guard uniform versus 19% for those in everyday clothes, directly replicating the uniform variation in a real urban setting with no deception about the request. This matters because it shows the situational variables Milgram identified operate in genuine social interactions, not just in a contrived shock procedure. This increases the ecological validity of Milgram's situational findings.

**Limitation — low mundane realism.** A limitation, however, is that the baseline scenario of administering electric shocks for wrong answers in a memory test lacks mundane realism. Real-world obedience situations — workplaces, hospitals, the military — rarely resemble this artificial set-up. This is important because if the task does not capture the kinds of moral conflict that occur in everyday obedience, the precise percentages from each variation may not transfer to real life. Although Hofling et al. (1966) and Bickman address this in part, the contrived shock task remains a weakness of the original variations.

**Limitation — situational explanation alone is insufficient (interactionist alternative).** A further limitation is that situational variables cannot account for individual differences. Even in the baseline condition, 35% of participants refused to go to 450 V; in the touch-proximity variation, 70% refused. This is a problem because if obedience were purely situational, all participants in identical conditions should behave identically. This supports an **interactionist** view in which dispositional factors (e.g. the Authoritarian Personality, locus of control) combine with situational pressures, providing a more complete account than situationism alone.

**Limitation — risk of an "obedience alibi" (ethical implications).** A final criticism, from Mandel (1998), is that situational explanations can be misused to absolve perpetrators by framing destructive obedience as something "anyone would have done". This is an example of **socially sensitive research**: the way obedience is explained has moral and legal consequences for how courts and societies assign responsibility for atrocities such as the Holocaust or My Lai. This is an important issues-and-debates limitation because it shows situational research has implications beyond the data — it shapes how blame is allocated.

## 7 Dispositional Explanation: The Authoritarian Personality

---

One explanation for why some people are more obedient than others is that they have an **Authoritarian Personality**. This is a **dispositional explanation** proposed by **Theodor W. Adorno**, who studied authoritarianism from the 1940s onwards and created "**The F Scale**" as a tool for measuring the authoritarian personality.

### Characteristics of the Authoritarian Personality (Adorno)

---

Adorno identified the following traits in those with authoritarian personalities:

- **Rigid beliefs** — black-and-white thinking, intolerance of ambiguity.
- **Conformity to norms** — strict adherence to conventional values.
- **Submissive to authority** — deference to those of higher status.
- **Focus on power and toughness** — belief in the need for strong leadership and hierarchy.
- **Hostility to those of lower status or members of an out-group** — often associated with prejudiced views toward minorities.

Authoritarian personalities may develop from a **harsh parenting style** during childhood — children of authoritarian parents internalise the hostility they experienced and later project it onto safer targets (a displacement mechanism).

### Origins

---

Adorno traced the Authoritarian Personality to a **harsh, punitive upbringing** with strict discipline. Children of authoritarian parents internalise the hostility they experienced and later project it onto safer targets (those of lower status or outgroups) — a **displacement** mechanism.

### Measurement: The F-Scale

---

Adorno developed the **F-scale (Fascism scale)**, a 30-item questionnaire assessing agreement with statements such as "Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn". High scorers showed greater obedience.

### Supporting Evidence

---

**Elms and Milgram (1966)** interviewed 20 of Milgram's fully obedient participants and 20 of his refusers. The obedient group scored significantly higher on the F-scale and reported more punitive parenting. This is direct support for Adorno's claim that obedience is linked to personality.

## Evaluation

---

**Strength — research support from Elms and Milgram (1966).** A key strength of the Authoritarian Personality theory is supporting evidence from Elms and Milgram (1966), who interviewed 20 of Milgram's fully obedient participants and 20 of his "refusers". The obedient group scored significantly higher on Adorno's F-scale and reported more punitive parenting in childhood. This is important because it provides empirical support for Adorno's claim that obedience is rooted in personality and traceable to a harsh upbringing. This therefore strengthens the validity of the dispositional explanation by linking F-scale scores directly to observed obedience.

**Limitation — correlational, not causal.** However, a major limitation is that the Elms and Milgram evidence is only *correlational*. The link between F-scale scores and obedience does not show that authoritarianism *causes* obedience — both could result from a third variable such as low socio-economic status, low educational attainment or restricted social mobility. This is important because the theory claims a causal mechanism (harsh parenting → displaced hostility → obedience to authority), but correlation alone cannot establish this. This therefore weakens the dispositional explanation as a causal account.

**Limitation — political bias in the F-scale.** A further limitation, highlighted by Christie and Jahoda (1954), is that the F-scale is politically lopsided. The items focus on *right-wing* authoritarianism (traditional family values, sexual repression, hostility to outgroups), but miss *left-wing* authoritarian obedience seen in Stalinist or Maoist regimes. This matters because if the scale only captures one ideological flavour of authoritarianism, it cannot serve as a general measure of obedience to authority. This restricts the theory's explanatory range and undermines its claim to identify a universal obedient personality.

**Limitation — methodological flaw (acquiescence bias).** A methodological problem with the F-scale is that all 30 items are worded so that *agreement* indicates authoritarianism. This makes the scale vulnerable to **acquiescence bias** — the tendency for some participants to agree with statements regardless of content. This is important because high F-scale scores may reflect response style rather than genuine authoritarian beliefs, reducing the construct validity of the measure. Consequently, correlations between F-scale and obedience may be artefacts of acquiescent responding rather than a genuine personality–obedience link.

**Limitation — outdated and culturally narrow sample.** Adorno's original sample was around 2,000 middle-class white Americans interviewed in the 1940s. This is an example of **cultural bias** (an imposed etic) and limits the theory's temporal validity, because attitudes to authority have shifted considerably since the post-war period. This is important because generalising the Authoritarian Personality to modern, diverse populations is risky — recent declines in deference to traditional authority figures (e.g. police, clergy) may make Adorno's 1940s profile less predictive today.

**Limitation — situational alternative (interactionist view).** Perhaps the strongest limitation is that Milgram's own variations show the *same* participants obey in some conditions and disobey in others — obedience falls from 65% to 47.5% just by changing the location. This is a problem for a purely dispositional account because if obedience were a fixed personality trait, situational manipulations should not produce such large swings. An **interactionist** view — dispositional vulnerability (Authoritarian Personality) combined with situational triggers (legitimacy, proximity, uniform) — therefore best fits the evidence.

**Conclusion.** Overall, while Adorno's theory captures a real link between personality and obedience, methodological weaknesses in the F-scale and the dominance of situational effects mean dispositional vulnerability is best understood as one part of a broader interactionist explanation.

**EXAM TIP**

Top-band 16-mark essays on the Authoritarian Personality must explicitly engage with the **dispositional vs situational** debate. Listing the personality traits alone caps at Level 3.

## 8 Resistance to Social Influence

Two main explanations for why people **resist** pressure to conform or obey: **social support** and **locus of control**.

### Social Support

Having an **ally** — even one — makes it much easier to resist social pressure. The presence of another person who disobeys gives the individual the courage to follow their own conscience.

#### Evidence — conformity

In Asch's variations, a single **dissenter** (a confederate giving the correct answer) reduced conformity from 32% to 5.5%. The dissenter breaks the **unanimity** of the group, removing the perception that the group is right.

#### Evidence — obedience

In one of Milgram's variations, the real participant was joined by two confederates posing as fellow teachers. When these confederates refused to continue, real-participant obedience dropped from 65% to **10%**. Social support from disobedient peers dramatically reduced obedience.

#### Why it works

- Reduces **normative pressure** — being "the only one" who refuses is harder than being one of several.
- Provides **permission** — seeing someone else resist legitimises your own resistance.
- Provides an **alternative source of information** — reduces ISI in ambiguous situations.

### Locus of Control (Rotter, 1966)

**Locus of control** describes a person's perception of how much control they have over the events in their own life.

Locus of control	Belief	Effect on social influence
<b>Internal</b>	Outcomes are determined by their own actions, decisions and effort. "What I do shapes what happens to me."	More likely to <b>resist</b> pressure — they trust their own judgement.
<b>External</b>	Outcomes are determined by luck, fate or powerful others. "Things happen to me regardless of what I do."	More likely to <b>conform and obey</b> — they defer to others' judgement.

Locus of control is measured on a continuum using **Rotter's Locus of Control Scale**.

#### Characteristics of internal LoC associated with resistance

- **Self-confidence** — trust in own ability and judgement.
- **Need for personal control** — desire to make own decisions.

- **Higher intelligence** (associated correlate, not cause).
- **Lower need for social approval.**

## Supporting Evidence

---

**Holland (1967)** repeated Milgram's procedure and measured participants' locus of control. He found **37%** of internals did not obey to 450 V, compared with **23%** of externals — direct support for the LoC explanation.

**Avtgis (1998)** meta-analysed studies on conformity and LoC; externals were significantly more likely to conform than internals across many studies.

## Evaluation

---

**Strength — research support for social support (Allen and Levine 1971).** A key strength of the social-support explanation is direct experimental evidence. Allen and Levine (1971) replicated Asch with a dissenting confederate and found conformity dropped sharply even when the dissenter was wearing thick glasses and obviously had poor vision. This is important because it shows the dissenter does not need to be credible — their mere presence as an ally is enough to break unanimity. This therefore strengthens the validity of social support as a genuine mechanism for resisting NSI, by demonstrating that the *act* of dissent matters more than the quality of the alternative answer.

**Strength — research support for locus of control (Holland 1967).** Locus of control is also well supported by research. Holland (1967) repeated Milgram's procedure and measured participants' locus of control, finding 37% of internals resisted obedience to 450 V compared with only 23% of externals. Further support comes from Avtgis's (1998) meta-analysis, in which externals were consistently more conformist than internals across many independent studies. This is important because it shows the LoC effect is replicable across paradigms and samples, strengthening the validity of Rotter's claim that perceived control is linked to resistance.

**Limitation — contradictory modern findings (Twenge et al. 2004).** However, a significant limitation comes from Twenge et al. (2004), whose meta-analysis showed that locus of control has become *more external* over the past 50 years — yet during the same period, measured resistance to social influence has *increased*, not decreased. This is important because the LoC explanation predicts the opposite pattern: if externals conform more, a more-external population should be more conformist. This contradiction undermines the validity of LoC as the primary cause of resistance, suggesting other social or generational factors (e.g. individualism, education) also drive resistance.

**Limitation — role of LoC is overstated (Rotter 1982).** A further limitation, acknowledged by Rotter himself (1982), is that LoC only matters in *novel* situations. In familiar situations, prior experience is a far stronger predictor of resistance than personality. This is important because most everyday conformity pressures (workplace meetings, peer groups) are familiar contexts, meaning LoC may have a weaker influence on real-world resistance than lab studies suggest. This narrows the scope of the LoC explanation considerably.

**Application — interventions for resistance (real-world value).** A clear strength of both explanations is their applied value. Anti-bullying programmes deliberately build "social-support networks" so that potential victims always have an ally, while critical-thinking and self-efficacy training in schools aims to shift learners towards a more internal locus of control. These interventions are designed on the basis of social-influence research and reduce harmful conformity. This is important because applied success — measurable reductions in bullying and risky peer-pressure behaviours — is strong evidence that the underlying explanations capture something genuine about resistance.

## 9 Minority Influence

**Minority influence** occurs when a small group (or single individual) changes the views or behaviour of a larger group. Unlike majority influence (which usually produces compliance), minority influence often leads to **internalisation** — a deep, lasting change in belief.

Moscovici (1969) proposed three key factors that make a minority influential: **consistency, commitment, flexibility**.

### The Three Factors

Factor	What it means	Why it works
<b>Consistency</b>	The minority holds the same view across <b>time</b> (diachronic consistency) and within the <b>group</b> — all members give the same view (synchronic consistency).	Consistency suggests the minority is <b>confident</b> and <b>certain</b> . Listeners cannot dismiss the view as a passing whim — it appears to be a genuine, considered position.
<b>Commitment</b>	The minority shows it is <b>willing to suffer</b> for its view — taking personal risks, sacrificing comfort or safety. Called the <b>augmentation principle</b> .	Personal sacrifice demonstrates the minority believes deeply in the cause; the majority is moved to take the view seriously.
<b>Flexibility</b>	The minority can adapt its position in response to reasonable counter-arguments. Not rigid; not dogmatic.	Mugny (1982) — being too dogmatic makes the minority seem unreasonable. Some flexibility allows compromise and gradual conversion.

### Moscovici (1969) — Blue/Green Slide Study

Feature	Detail
<b>Aim</b>	To investigate whether a consistent minority could influence a majority.
<b>Procedure</b>	Groups of 6 (4 real participants + 2 confederates) were shown 36 blue slides varying in intensity and asked to call out the colour. In the <b>consistent condition</b> , the 2 confederates called all 36 slides "green". In the <b>inconsistent condition</b> , the confederates called 24 "green" and 12 "blue".
<b>Findings</b>	<b>Consistent condition:</b> 8.4% of trials yielded a "green" response from real participants. <b>Inconsistent condition:</b> only 1.25%. A control group (no confederates) gave "green" on under 0.25% of trials.
<b>Conclusion</b>	A consistent minority can influence the majority — significantly more so than an inconsistent one. Consistency is a key driver of minority influence.

## Process — How Minority Influence Works

---

Moscovici proposed minority influence works through **conversion**: when the minority is consistent, committed and flexible, the majority is forced to engage in **deeper processing** of the message — examining why the minority believes what it does. This is the **snowball effect**: a small group's view gradually attracts more supporters, eventually becoming the majority view.

Unlike majority influence (which often produces only compliance), minority influence typically leads to **internalisation** — because the listener engages with the substance of the message.

## Evaluation

---

**Strength — research support for consistency (Wood et al. 1994).** A key strength of minority influence theory is supporting evidence for the role of consistency. Wood et al.'s (1994) meta-analysis of nearly 100 studies found that minorities perceived as consistent were the most influential — confirming Moscovici's (1969) original blue/green slide finding (8.4% influence in the consistent condition vs 1.25% in the inconsistent condition). This is important because it shows the consistency effect is robust across studies, samples and tasks rather than a one-off artefact. This therefore strengthens the validity of Moscovici's claim that consistency is the primary driver of minority influence.

**Strength — internal validity through experimental control.** A further strength of Moscovici's study is its high internal validity. By using a standardised set of 36 blue slides varying only in intensity, and manipulating only one variable (consistency of the confederates' incorrect "green" responses), Moscovici could isolate the causal effect of consistency on minority influence. This is important because it allows confident causal inference — the 8.4% green-response rate in the consistent condition can be directly attributed to confederate consistency, not chance or stimulus ambiguity. This supports the theory's mechanistic claim about how minorities exert influence.

**Limitation — artificial task (low mundane realism).** However, a major limitation is that the blue/green slide task lacks mundane realism. Real-world minority influence — civil rights, suffrage, gay rights, climate activism — involves moral, emotional and identity-relevant content that a perceptual colour-judgement task cannot capture. This is important because the cost of dissenting in the lab is trivial, whereas real minority members often face social, professional or physical risks. This limits the external validity of Moscovici's findings and means the 8.4% effect may underestimate (or misrepresent) how consistency operates in genuine social-change contexts.

**Limitation — gender-biased sample.** A further limitation is that Moscovici used 172 *female* participants only. This produces a **beta-biased** sample because it assumes results from women generalise to men, and later studies have not always replicated the consistency effect cleanly across gender. This is important because if the magnitude of minority influence varies by gender, the universal three-factor model needs qualification. This restricts the generalisability of Moscovici's conclusions.

**Limitation — oversimplified three-factor model.** Although consistency, commitment and flexibility capture core features of effective minorities, real minority influence usually involves additional factors such as group identification, perceived expertise and shared social identity (Bond and Smith 1996). This is important because oversimplified models risk explaining laboratory findings without capturing the full complexity of real-world social movements. The three-factor model is therefore best treated as a useful starting point rather than a complete account of minority influence.

**Application — explains social change (real-world value).** A final strength is the theory's strong applied value in explaining genuine social change. Movements such as the suffragettes (consistent campaigning over decades), Martin Luther King Jr's civil rights work (commitment through personal sacrifice) and the marriage-equality movement (flexibility in dialogue with opponents) display all three factors, and ultimately shifted majority opinion via the **snowball effect**. This is important because the theory accounts not only for lab findings but for historically significant changes in public attitudes, supporting its validity beyond Moscovici's blue/green slides.

**Conclusion.** Overall, while methodological limitations qualify the findings, the combination of robust meta-analytic support and clear real-world application means Moscovici's theory remains a powerful explanation of how minorities can convert majorities through deep processing and lasting internalisation.

#### **EXAM TIP — APPLYING MINORITY INFLUENCE**

When asked to apply minority influence to a scenario (e.g. a campaign group, a workplace whistleblower), identify the **THREE** factors and explain how each is or isn't present in the scenario. Generic "they were consistent" without saying *how* caps the answer.