SOLOMON ASCH ON CONFORMITY

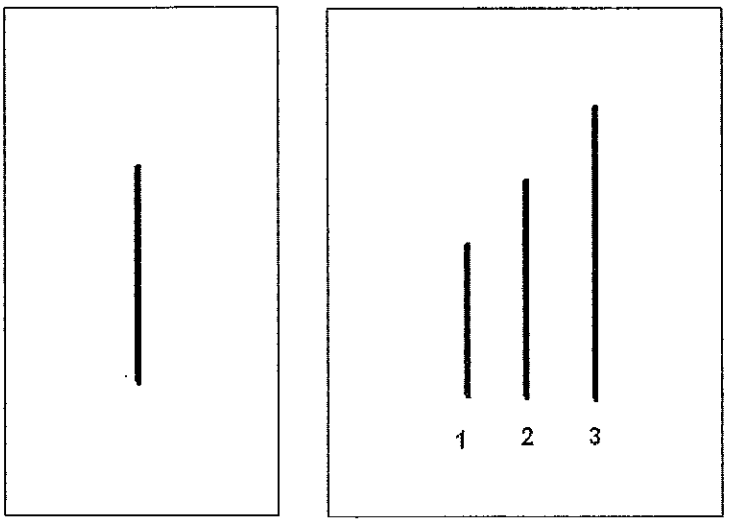
Solomon Asch was strongly influenced by the Gestalt psychologists, and he, like Kurt Lewin (chapter 55), extended his holistic emphasis to the study of social behavior. His career centered around the application of careful scientific experimentation to human social influence—the influence of one person (or group of persons) on another—while still capturing the richness and complexity of those influences. He did this by introducing experimental variations into controlled, but real, social settings. His experiments on conformity pitted physical reality against social influence, and the results showed just how powerful the latter could be.

Solomon E. Asch (1907–96) was born in Warsaw, Poland, and came to the United States in 1920. He received his B.S. from the College of the City of New York in 1928, and his M.A. and Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1930 and 1932, respectively. He taught at Brooklyn College, the New School for Social Research, Swarthmore College, and Rutgers University before joining the University of Pennsylvania, where he remained. During his 19 years at Swarthmore, he was part of a group of Gestalt psychologists that included Wolfgang Köhler (chapter 21).

Asch was familiar with previous experiments by Muzafer Sherif (chapter 54) on the *autokinetic effect*. This effect refers to the fact that a spot of light in an otherwise darkened room may after a while appear to move around. In Sherif's experiment, groups of participants made judgments of how much they thought the light was moving, and in which direction. He showed that the judgments tended to converge. Since the movements were wholly illusory, this can only mean that each participant's judgments of the movement were influenced by the judgments of others—social influence.

Asch wished to explore the limits of such conformity in judgment. After all, the autokinetic effect is illusory; one is making judgments about a movement that does not in fact occur. But can social pressure also affect one's judgment about a real situation that one perceives directly? It can.

Figure 56.1
Stimuli of the kind used in Asch's conformity experiments. Of the lines in the right-hand card, which one is the same length as the line on the left?



In Asch's original experiment (1951), a group of 9 or 10 "participants" were brought together around a table. They were shown pairs of cards placed a few feet in front of them (figure 56.1). On one card was a black vertical line; on the other card there were three black lines of varying lengths. The participants' task was very simple indeed: they were to decide, for each of several such pairs, which of the three lines was equal in length to the one line of the other card. Here, obviously, it is line 2. The task was so easy, the experimenter said, that he would save time by letting the participants simply call out their judgments one by one rather than writing them down.

Now in fact, there was only one real participant. All the other people seated around the table were assistants to the experimenter, and they all acted out a prearranged scenario. Seating was arranged so that the real participant came last; he called out his judgments only after all the others had called out theirs.

For the first few trials, all of the false participants gave the answer that was obviously correct—and, of course, the real participant did the same. But then, the confederates began giving unanimous, but wrong, answers. Confronted with an array like figure 56.1, they might all agree that line 1, rather than line 2, was the one that matched the single line. Around the table, the confederates called out the same wrong answer—until it was the real participant's turn. The participant had just heard person after person make the same judgment, when that judgment was obviously wrong. What would he himself do?

We can surely empathize with the real participant's intense discomfort here. The direct evidence of his senses shows the one answer is correct. But the group's unanimous opinion is that another answer is correct. Is there perhaps something wrong with his eyes? With his sanity? Can everyone else really be so wrong as it appears?

Figure 56.2
A bewildered participant in Asch's conformity experiment. The participant (center) is uncertain whether to doubt his eyes or his ears, as he hears everyone else in the room give an answer that he sees is obviously wrong.

Source: From Asch (1955). Photograph by William Vandivert.

He must now call out his own judgment. What shall he do? Shall he trust his senses, or shall he defer to the group and give the same wrong judgment as they?

In fact, only about one in four participants (over several repetitions of this experiment) consistently gave the correct answer. All the others deferred to the group on at least some trials, letting the judgments of the group override their own. On average, such conformity occurred on about a third of the trials.

When they were interviewed after the experiment was over, only very few participants reported that the group's unanimous response has actually changed how they saw the lines. It was clear to most of them that the group answer was simply wrong. But they wondered whether they were right, they expressed concern for their eyesight, and they found it extremely embarrassing to go against the judgment of the group so directly and publicly. Asch went on to check this point directly: in a repetition of the experiment, the real participant wrote down his answers privately rather than calling them out publicly. Under these conditions, nearly everyone wrote down the correct answers even after hearing the unanimous, incorrect judgments of other group members.

Apparently, then, the pressure to conform came from the fact that nonconformity was public, which meant that the participant would risk looking strange or foolish to the other members of the group if he reported publicly what he actually saw. If so, this itself is striking. Why should he care? The other, false participants were complete strangers, and the real participant would probably never see them again. Despite this, their good opinion of him was a powerful inducement for him to deny the direct evidence of his senses.

Asch explored his finding further, and discovered more about it (1955). He asked, for example, Does conformity increase with the size of the majority group? Up to a point it does, but that point is reached quickly. When Asch repeated his experiment, varying the number of unanimous confederates from 1 to 14, he found that

the conformity increased up to a group size of 4, but showed little increase beyond that. It doesn't take many to form a commanding "majority."

In addition, it makes a difference whether the group is unanimous in its wrong judgments (Asch, 1956). Asch again repeated his original experiment, with seven confederates present in addition to the participant. But in this variation, only six of the seven gave the wrong answer; the remaining one gave the right answer on every trial (and, of course, it was arranged that he do so before it was the real participant's turn to speak). This was a great help in permitting the participant himself to disagree with the majority. On average, people conformed only six percent of the time when there was one other dissenter from the majority. If there were no other dissenter, 32 percent conformed in this experiment.

That raises another question. Why does having one "fellow dissenter" make it easier for a person not to conform? Is it because the dissenter agrees with him? Or is it because the dissenter breaks up the unanimity of the group? It turns out to be the latter. Asch separated the two possibilities with another elegantly simple twist to his original experiment. In this one, again all the confederates but one gave the same wrong answer. The remaining confederate also gave a wrong answer, but it was a *different* wrong answer from the majority one. This was enough! It greatly reduced the tendency of the participant himself to conform to the majority.

Apparently, someone does not have to agree with us, but only has to break up the *unanimity* of the group's opinion, in order to reduce the force of that opinion in producing compliance. Other investigations of conformity and compliance, such as Milgram's experiments on obedience to authority (chapter 58), found a similar effect: What matters is not that one have an ally, but only that one not be alone in dissenting.

Much further work has been done, using this procedure to explore not only the effect itself but also how it depends in turn on gender, personality variables, the cultural background of the participants, and much besides. We cannot explore this literature here (see Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 1994, for discussion). But Asch's own series of experiments, considered by themselves, show how much—and how easily—what we say can be affected by even the most minimal social pressure.

Finally, it is worth recalling Asch's criteria for a good experiment: controlled enough to permit sound science, but asking questions of importance to human beings. Conformity to a group's opinion, despite one's own reservations, happens in the real world, not just in the laboratory:

> In 1961, President John F. Kennedy, after meeting with his advisors, approved a CIA plan to invade Cuba at the Bay of Pigs and overthrow Fidel Castro; the invasion was a humiliating disaster . . . Arthur Schlesinger, one of Kennedy's advisors, later reported that he had grave doubts about the Bay of Pigs invasion, but he did not express them out of fear that "Others would regard it as presumptuous of him, a college professor, to take issue with august heads of major government institutions." (Wade & Tavris, 2000, pp. 677–678)

Psychologist Irving Janis calls it *groupthink*, this tendency for dissenters from a unanimous opinion (or what they take to be one) to suppress their doubts and reservations rather than stand alone in opposition. Janis's book discusses many instances of groupthink—and its consequences, which can be severe.

One final point. Asch's series of experiments is a particularly good example of the *progressive* nature of a research project. His first experiment showed the conformity effect—the willingness to suspend one's own judgment in response to group pressure. Asch then went on to ask, How big does such a group have to be? (Not very.) Is it important that it be unanimous? (Yes.) Then is this because another dissenter supports the correct answer, or just because he *is* a dissenter? (The latter.) Each question leads to a further experiment, which leads to another in turn; and all the while, in small steps, our understanding advances.

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