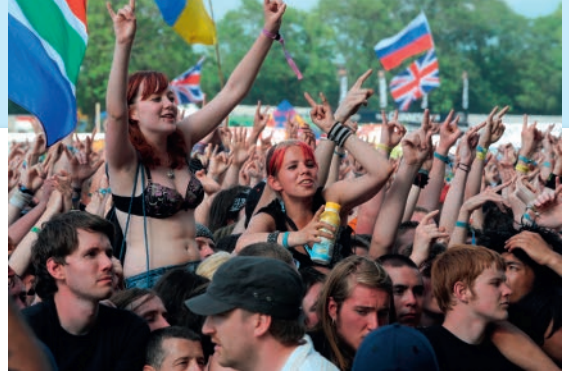


CHAPTER 26

CONFORMITY AND GROUP INFLUENCE



Majority influence

Minority influence

Other group processes

INTRODUCTION and OVERVIEW

It's impossible to live among other people and not be influenced by them in some way. According to Allport (1968), Social Psychology as a discipline can be defined as:

... An attempt to understand and explain how the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others.

Sometimes, other people's attempts to change our thoughts or behaviour are very obvious, as when, for example, a traffic warden tells us not to park our car in a particular place. If we do as we're told and move the car, we're demonstrating *obedience*, which implies that one person (in this example, the traffic warden, an authority figure) has more social power than others (motorists). Obedience is discussed in Chapter 27.

In common with obedience, other forms of *active* social influence involve deliberate attempts by one person to change another's thoughts or behaviour.

Ask Yourself

- Try to identify some other examples of *active social influence* (see previous chapters in Part 4, 'Social Psychology', of this book and the 'Links with other topics/chapters' section at the end of this chapter).

However, on other occasions, social influence is less direct and deliberate and may not involve any explicit requests or demands at all. For example, sometimes the mere presence of other people can influence our behaviour. This can take the form of *inhibiting* our behaviour, as in bystander intervention

(see Chapter 30) or social loafing, or *enhancing* it, as in social facilitation (see Chapter 31).

Another form of indirect or passive social influence occurs when your choice of clothes or taste in music is affected by what your friends wear or listen to. This is *conformity*. Your peers (equals) exert pressure on you to behave (and think) in particular ways, a case of the majority influencing the individual (*majority influence*). But majorities can also be influenced by minorities (*minority influence*). Related to conformity are other group processes, such as the *risky shift phenomenon* and *group polarisation*.

According to Turner (1991), central to 'social influence' is the concept of a social norm, which he defines as:

A rule, value or standard shared by the members of a social group that prescribes appropriate, expected or desirable attitudes and conduct in matters relevant to the group ...

Influence relates to the processes whereby people agree or disagree about appropriate behaviour, form, maintain or change social norms, and the social conditions that give rise to, and the effects of, such norms ...

MAJORITY INFLUENCE

What is conformity?

Conformity has been defined in a number of ways. For Crutchfield (1955), it is 'yielding to group pressure'. Zimbardo and Leippe (1991) define conformity as:

... A change in belief or behaviour in response to real or imagined group pressure when there is no direct request to comply with the group nor any reason to justify the behaviour change.

Ask Yourself

- What do these definitions have in common?

Group pressure is the common denominator in definitions of conformity, although none of them specifies particular groups with particular beliefs or practices. Pressure is exerted by those groups that are important to the individual at a given time; these may consist of 'significant others', such as family or peers (*membership groups*), or groups whose values a person admires or aspires to, but to which s/he doesn't actually belong (*reference groups*).

Conformity, then, doesn't imply adhering to any particular social norms. Rather, it involves yielding to

the real or imagined pressures of any group, whether it has majority *or* minority status (van Avermaet, 1996) (see below).

Experimental studies of conformity

A study by Jenness (1932) is sometimes cited as the very first experimental study of conformity, although it's usually discussed in the context of social facilitation (see Chapter 31). Jenness asked individual students to estimate the number of beans in a bottle and then had them discuss it to arrive at a group estimate. When they were asked individually to make a second estimate, there was a distinct shift towards the group's estimate. Sherif (1935) used a similar procedure in one of the classic conformity experiments. (See Key Study 26.1.)

Key Study 26.1

If the light appears to move, it must be the Sherif (Sherif, 1935)

- Sherif used a visual illusion called the *autokinetic effect*: a stationary spot of light seen in an otherwise dark room appears to move (see Chapter 15). He told participants he was going to move the light and their task was to say how far they thought the light moved.
- Participants were first tested individually, being asked to estimate the extent of movement several times. The estimates fluctuated to begin with,

but then became quite consistent (despite wide individual differences).

- They then heard the estimates of two other participants. In this *group condition*, the estimates of different participants *converged* (they became more *similar*). Thus, a *group norm* developed: the average of the individual estimates.
- Just as different individuals produced different estimates, so did different groups. This happened both under the conditions already described, and also when participants were tested in small groups right from the start.



Figure 26.1 Median judgements of the apparent movement of a stationary point of light given by participants in Sherif's (1935) experiment. The figure shows the estimates given by four groups

According to Sherif, participants used others' estimates as a frame of reference in what was an *ambiguous* situation. Note that:

- Participants weren't in any way instructed to agree with the others in the group (unlike the Jenness study).
- When participants were tested again individually, their estimates closely resembled the group norm (rather than their original, individual, estimates).

Evaluation 26.1

Sherif's experiment

- According to Brown (1996), despite the classic status of Sherif's study, it seems to raise questions rather than provide answers.
 - In what sense can Sherif's participants be described as a group?
 - Can we speak of group norms without any direct interaction taking place or participants seeing themselves as engaged in some kind of joint activity?
- In post-experimental interviews, participants all denied being influenced by others' judgements. They also claimed that they struggled to arrive at the 'correct' answers on their own. In other words, they didn't consider themselves part of a group (at least taking their accounts at face value).
- While Sherif believed he'd demonstrated conformity, Asch argued that the ambiguous nature of Sherif's task made it difficult to draw any definite conclusions about conformity. Conformity should be measured in terms of the individual's tendency to agree with other group members who unanimously give the *wrong* answer on a task where the solution is obvious. This is a much stricter test of conformity than where there's no correct or incorrect answer to begin with.
- Asch devised a simple perceptual task that involved participants deciding which of three comparison lines of different lengths matched a standard line. In a pilot study, Asch tested 36 participants individually on 20 slightly different versions of the task shown in Figure 26.2. They made a total of only three mistakes in the 720 trials (an error rate of 0.42 per cent).

Ask Yourself

- What was the purpose of the pilot study?
- What conclusions do you think Asch drew from its results?

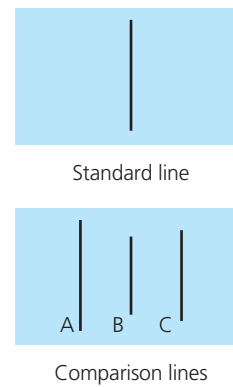


Figure 26.2 Stimulus cards used in Asch's conformity experiments (1951, 1952, 1956)

The pilot study (which involved participants who weren't to take part in the actual experiment) was designed to establish that the task really was unambiguous. Asch concluded that it was. Because his procedure for studying conformity can be adapted to investigate the effects of different variables on conformity, it's known as the *Asch paradigm* (see Focus 26.1).

The important measure in the Asch paradigm is whether the naïve participant gives the same wrong answer as the unanimous stooges on the critical trials or remains independent and gives the obviously correct answer. Asch found a mean conformity rate of 32 per cent; participants agreed with the incorrect majority answer on about one-third of the critical trials.

As shown in Table 26.1, there were also wide *individual differences*:

- No one conformed on all the critical trials and 13 of the 50 participants (26 per cent) never conformed.
- One person conformed on 11 of the 12 critical trials and about 75 per cent conformed at least once.

Given that the task was simple and unambiguous, such findings indicate a high level of conformity. As van Avermaet (1996) has remarked 'The results reveal the tremendous impact of an "obviously" incorrect but unanimous majority on the judgements of a lone individual'.

How did the naïve participants explain their behaviour?

When interviewed at length following the experiment, participants gave a number of specific reasons for conforming.

- Some wanted to act in accordance with the experimenter's wishes and convey a favourable impression of themselves by not 'upsetting the experiment' (which they believed they would have done by disagreeing with the majority); they thought some obscure 'mistake' had been made.

Focus 26.1 The Asch paradigm

Some of the participants who'd taken part in the pilot study were asked to act as 'stooges' (or 'confederates: accomplices of the experimenter). The stooges were told they'd be doing the task again, but this time in a group that would contain one person (a naïve participant) who was completely unaware that they were stooges.

On certain *critical* trials, all the stooges were required to say out loud the same *wrong* answer. In Asch's original experiment, the stooges (usually seven to nine of them) and the naïve participant were seated either in a straight line or round a table. The situation was rigged so that the naïve participant was always the last or last but one to say the answer out loud.

On the first two trials (*neutral* trials), all the stooges gave the correct answers. But the next trial was a critical trial. This happened a further 11 times (making 12 critical trials in total) with four additional neutral trials (making six in total) between the critical trials.



Figure 26.3 A minority of one faces a unanimous majority (Courtesy William Vandivert and *Scientific American*, November 1955)

Table 26.1 The findings from Asch's original experiment

No. of conforming responses made	No. of people making those responses
0	13
1	4
2	5
3	6
4	3
5	4
6	1
7	2
8	5
9	3
10	3
11	1
12	0

- A few genuinely doubted the validity of their own judgements by wondering if they were suffering from eye-strain, or if their chairs had been moved so that they couldn't see the cards properly.
- Some denied being aware of having given incorrect answers – they'd unwittingly used the confederates as 'marker posts' (Smith, 1995).
- Others said they wanted to be like everyone else, didn't want to 'appear different', 'be made to look a fool', a 'social outcast' or 'inferior'. So, for these

participants there was a discrepancy between the answer they gave in the group and what they privately believed: they knew the 'wrong' answer was wrong, but went along with it nonetheless. Contrast this with Sherif's participants, for whom there was no conflict between the group's estimate and their own, individual estimates.

- Recent analyses indicate that these explanations of their own responses show that participants weren't blindly and passively conforming. Rather, they were faced with a strange and alarming situation of which they had to try to make sense (Reicher *et al.*, 2012).

Factors affecting conformity

So far, we've described the original, basic experiment. Asch (1952, 1955) subsequently manipulated different variables in order to identify the crucial influences on conformity.

Size of the majority and unanimity

With one naïve participant and just one stooge, conformity was very low (about 3 per cent), ('it's my word against yours'). Where there were two stooges and one participant, conformity increased to 14 per cent and, with three stooges, it reached the 32 per cent that Asch originally reported. But beyond three, conformity didn't continue to rise. This suggests that it's the *unanimity* of the majority which is important (the stooges all agree with each other), rather than the actual size of the majority (the number of stooges).

This was demonstrated when one of the stooges (a *dissenter*) agreed with the naïve participant. With

one 'supporter', conformity dropped from 32 to 5.5 per cent. Significantly, a dissenter who disagrees with *both* the naïve participant and the majority has almost as much effect on reducing conformity as one who agrees with the naïve participant. In both cases, the majority is no longer unanimous. Thus, just breaking the unanimity of the majority is sufficient to reduce conformity (Allen and Levine, 1971). According to Asch (1951):

... A unanimous majority of three is, under the given conditions, far more effective than a majority of eight containing one dissenter ...

However, this reduction in conformity only seems to apply to unambiguous stimulus situations (like Asch's perceptual task), and not where opinions are being asked for (Allen and Levine, 1968).

Fear of ridicule

In the original experiment, it seems that participants were justified in fearing they'd be ridiculed by the rest of the group if they gave the answer they believed to be correct. When a group of 16 naïve participants and a single stooge were tested, the stooge's wrong answers on the critical trials were greeted with sarcasm, exclamations of disbelief, and mocking laughter!

Task difficulty

When Asch made the comparison lines more similar in length (making the task more difficult), participants were more likely to yield to the incorrect majority answer – especially when they felt confident there was a correct answer. When tasks involve expressing opinions or stating preferences – making them more ambiguous – conformity actually *decreases*.

Ask Yourself

- How does this relate to Allen and Levine's (1968) finding above regarding the effect of breaking the majority's unanimity?
- Is the kind of ambiguity relevant?

Giving answers in private

Participants may conform because they're reluctant or too embarrassed to expose their private views in face-to-face situations (as many of them indicated in post-experimental interviews). If so, the level of conformity should *decrease* if they're allowed to write their answers down, or where they remain anonymous in some other way.

For example, Deutsch and Gerard (1955) used partitions which shielded participants from each other, with responses showing up on a light panel in front of

them – the naïve participant had to press one of three buttons. Under these conditions, conformity was lower than in Asch's face-to-face situation. Indeed, when Asch himself allowed the naïve participant to answer in writing (while the stooges still gave their answers publicly), conformity dropped to 12.5 per cent.

Crutchfield (1954) also used a non-face-to-face procedure. He criticised Asch's experiments for being time-consuming and uneconomical since only one participant could be tested at a time. So, he changed the experimental situation so that several (usually five) naïve participants could be tested at the same time. Altogether, he tested over 600.

Replications of Asch's research

Key Study 26.2

Who needs confederates? (Mori and Arai, 2010)

- Mori and Arai adapted the MORI technique (Manipulation of Overlapping Rivalrous Images by polarising filters – used previously in eyewitness research): by wearing glasses similar to those used for watching 3-D movies, participants can view the same display and yet see three *different* things.
- Over 100 Japanese participants (male and female) were tested in groups of four; three wore identical glasses, with the fourth wearing a different pair. As in Asch's study, participants stated their answers publicly, with the minority participant always going third.
- For women only, the results closely matched Asch's. But the males were *not* at all influenced by the majority.
- Not only were these participants from a different culture and generation from Asch's, but they knew each other. Mori and Arai argue that conformity among acquaintances is more important as a psychological research topic than among strangers. Conformity usually takes place within families, friendship or colleague groups, and the Asch experiment lacks ecological validity.

Were Asch's findings a reflection of the times? Asch began his research expecting to show that people weren't as suggestible as was commonly believed at the time – and as suggested by Sherif's experiments. He believed that Americans could act independently, even when faced with a majority that saw the world differently from themselves.

Larsen (1974) found significantly lower conformity rates than Asch among groups of American students

and suggested that this was because of a changed climate of opinion in America in the 1970s towards independence and criticism and away from conformity. However, in a later study, Larsen *et al.* (1979) found results very similar to Asch's. Perhaps the pendulum had begun to swing back again. Why might this have happened?

The early 1950s was the McCarthyism era in the USA. This is named after the US Senator Joseph McCarthy, who claimed to have unearthed an anti-American Communist plot. This resulted in a witch-hunt of alleged Communist sympathisers, which included academics and Hollywood stars. Under these social and political conditions, high conformity is to be expected (Spencer and Perrin, 1998). By the early 1970s, there was a more liberal climate, but this may have changed again by the late 1970s.

In Britain, Perrin and Spencer (1981) found very low rates of conformity among university students during a period of self-expression and tolerance. As Spencer and Perrin (1998) say, 'The Asch findings are clearly an indicator of the prevailing culture'.

Ask Yourself

- Perrin and Spencer (1981) tested young offenders on probation, with probation officers as stooges.
- How do you think conformity rates with these participants compared with those of Asch?
- Explain your answer.

We might expect the general social and political climate in Britain in the early 1980s to have had a different impact on university students than on young offenders. Additionally, the stooges were adult authority figures, which means that the group wasn't composed of peers (or equals). Not surprisingly, conformity rates were much higher than for the undergraduates and were similar to those reported by Asch.

It's also possible that experimenters exert an influence. As Brown (1985) has noted, perhaps experimenters' expectations of the amount of conformity that will occur in an experiment are unwittingly conveyed to the participants, who respond accordingly (see Chapter 3).

Cross-cultural studies of conformity

As shown in Table 26.2, the vast majority of conformity studies using the Asch paradigm have been carried out in Britain and the USA. However, using meta-analysis, Bond and Smith (1996) were able to compare the British and American studies with the small number carried out in other parts of the world. After all relevant factors have been taken into account, the studies can be compared in terms of an *averaged effect size*, in this case, the conformity rate.

Table 26.2 Asch conformity studies by national culture (based on Bond and Smith, 1996; from Smith and Bond, 1998)

Nation	Number of studies	Averaged effect size
Asch's own US studies	18	1.16
Other US studies	79	0.90
Canada	1	1.37
UK	10	0.81
Belgium	4	0.91
France	2	0.56
Netherlands	1	0.74
Germany	1	0.92
Portugal	1	0.58
Japan	5	1.42
Brazil	3	1.60
Fiji	2	2.48
Hong Kong	1	1.93
Arab samples (Kuwait, Lebanon)	2	1.31
Africa (Zimbabwe, Republic of the Congo [Zaire], Ghana)	3	1.84

Ask Yourself

- Are there any patterns in the conformity rates (averaged effect size) in Table 26.2?
- For example, are those countries with the highest and lowest conformity geographically and/or culturally related?

According to Smith and Bond (1998), the countries represented in Table 26.2 can be described as *individualist* (such as the USA, the UK and other Western European countries) or *collectivist* (such as Japan, Fiji and the African countries). In individualist cultures, one's identity is defined by personal choices and achievements, while in collectivist cultures it's defined in terms of the collective group one belongs to (such as the family or religious group). As might be expected, the tendency is for more conformity in collectivist cultures (but see Key Study 26.2).

Evaluation 26.2

The Asch paradigm

- According to Fiske (2004), Asch's research could be seen as focusing on a 'stripped-down' form of social influence, without any real interaction – 'Asch's groups weren't very groupy'. This mirrors Brown's criticism of Sherif's experiments (see above).
- Asch took an individualist view of groups, rather than a more social interactionist view – that is, he focused on participants as individuals within a group as distinct from a group process as such. None of his groups actually interacted, and he concentrated on individual naïve participants' *independence* rather than group members' *interdependence* (Leyens and Corneille, 1999).

Why do people conform?

Different types of social influence

One very influential and widely accepted account of group influence is Deutsch and Gerard's (1955) distinction between *informational social influence* (ISI) and *normative social influence* (NSI).

Informational social influence (ISI)

Underlying ISI is the need to be right, to have an accurate perception of reality. So when we're uncertain or face an ambiguous situation, we look to others to help us perceive the stimulus situation accurately (or define the situation: see Chapter 30). This involves a *social comparison* with other group members in order to reduce the uncertainty.

As we saw earlier, Sherif's experiment involves an inherently ambiguous situation: the light doesn't actually move. Under these conditions, participants were only too willing to validate their own estimates by comparing them with those of others. The results were consistent with Sherif's *social reality hypothesis*, which states that:

The less one can rely on one's own direct perception and behavioural contact with the physical world, the more susceptible one should be to influence from others ... (Turner, 1991)

According to Festinger's (1954) *social comparison theory*, people have a basic need to evaluate their ideas and attitudes and, in turn, to confirm that they're correct. This can provide a reassuring sense of control over one's world, and a satisfying sense of competence. In novel or ambiguous situations, social reality is defined by what others think and do. This is necessary if the group is to reach its goals (*group locomotion*).

Mythbuster 26.1

Unconscious adjustments

Significantly, Sherif's participants were relatively unaware of being influenced by the other judges. As Turner (1991) observes, they appear to be largely unconsciously adjusting their judgement based on others' judgements to 'arrive at a stable, agreed picture of a shared but initially unstructured world'.

Normative social influence (NSI)

Underlying NSI is the need to be accepted by other people, and to make a favourable impression on them. We conform because of other people's power to reward, punish, accept, or reject us.

In Asch's experiment, most participants weren't unsure about the correct answer. Rather, they were faced with a conflict between two sources of information, which in unambiguous situations normally coincide, namely their own judgement and that of others. If they chose their own judgement, they risked rejection and ridicule by the majority. Recall, though, that some participants were unaware of any conflict or of having given an incorrect response.

Internalisation and compliance

Related to ISI and NSI are two kinds of conformity:

1. *Internalisation* occurs when a private belief or opinion becomes consistent with a public belief or opinion: we say what we believe and believe what we say. Mann (1969) calls this *true conformity* and it can be thought of as a *conversion* to other people's points of view, especially in ambiguous situations.
2. *Compliance* occurs when the answers given publicly aren't those that are privately believed: we say what we don't believe and what we believe we don't say. Compliance represents a compromise in situations where people face a conflict between what they privately believe and what others publicly say they believe.

Ask Yourself

- Which kind of conformity was most common in Sherif's and Asch's experiments?
- How are internalisation and compliance related to NSI and ISI?

In Sherif's experiment, participants internalised others' judgements and made them their own. Faced with an ambiguous situation, participants were guided by what others believed to reduce their uncertainty. So, *internalisation* is related to ISI.

By contrast, most of Asch's participants knew that the majority answers on the critical trials were wrong, but often agreed with them publicly. They were complying with the majority to avoid ridicule or rejection. So, *compliance* is related to NSI. (See Figure 26.4.)

Do we have to choose between ISI and NSI?

The ISI/NSI distinction has proved very influential. But like all distinctions, it faces the problem of being a

false dichotomy: are they really separate, opposite forms of influence? A study by Insko *et al.* (1983) suggests that they can operate together (see Key Study 26.3).

Remember that when Asch made the three comparison lines much more similar – and hence the task more difficult – conformity increased. Clearly, ISI was involved here. If we believe there's a correct answer but are uncertain what it is, it seems quite logical to expect that we'd be more influenced by a

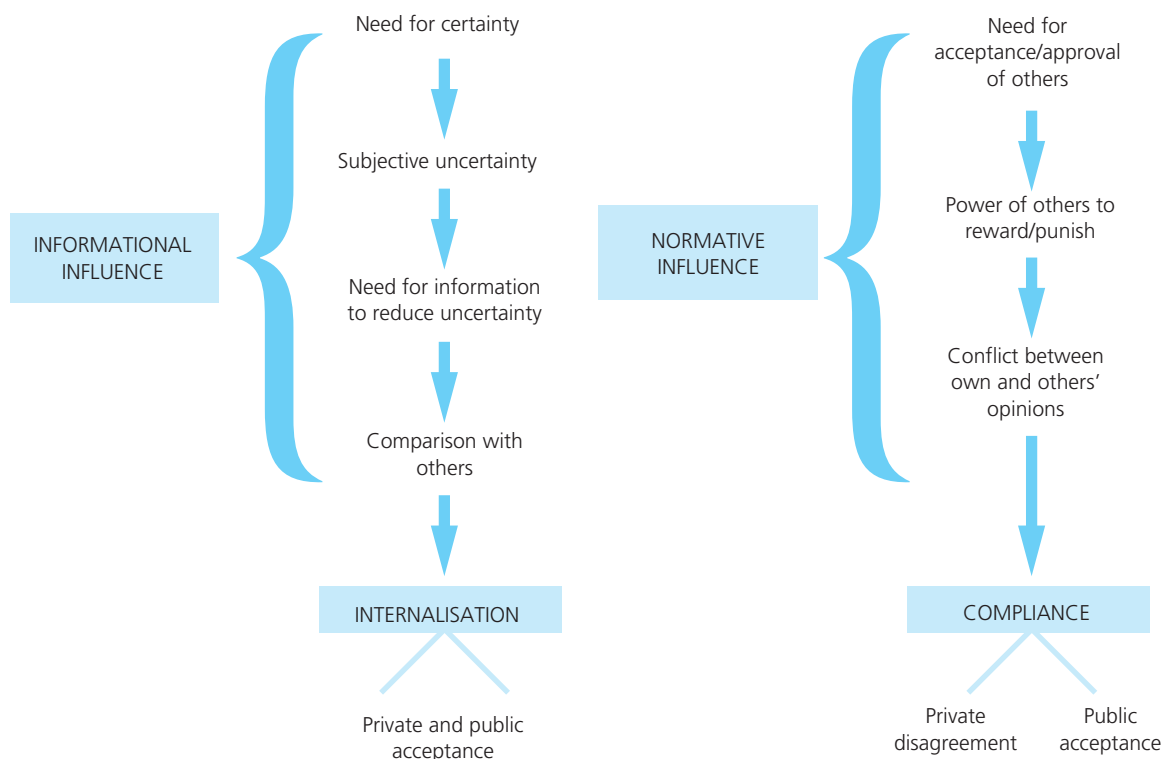


Figure 26.4 The relationship between different kinds of influence and different kinds of conformity

Key Study 26.3

The compatibility of ISI and NSI (Insko *et al.*, 1983)

- Insko *et al.* had participants, in groups of six, judge whether a colour shown on a slide was more similar to another colour shown to the left or to one shown to the right.
- On critical trials, four stooges who answered before the naïve participant, and another who answered last, gave answers which deviated from those given by most participants in a control condition.
- There were two independent variables:
 1. Participants answered either publicly or privately.
 2. The experimenter said that he either was or wasn't able to determine which response was more correct (in the 'determined' condition, he

referred to an apparatus through which he could accurately measure which response was more correct; in the 'undetermined' condition, he said this was impossible).

- Two hypotheses were tested:
 1. There will be greater conformity in the public than the private condition due to NSI.
 2. There will be greater conformity in the determined than the undetermined condition due to ISI.
- Both hypotheses were confirmed. Also, the determined condition produced greater conformity in both private and public conditions, and all four conditions produced greater conformity than the control condition. Hence, even with 'objective stimuli', ISI can add to the effect of NSI (van Avermaet, 1996).

unanimous majority. This is why having a supporter, or the presence of a dissenter, has the effect of reducing conformity. By breaking the group consensus, the participant is shown both that disagreement is possible and that the group is fallible.

Both ISI and NSI can operate in conjunction with each other, and shouldn't be seen as opposed processes of influence.

Conformity and group belongingness

The distinction between NSI and ISI has been called the *dual process dependency model* (DPDM) of social influence (e.g. Turner, 1991). But this model underestimates the role of group 'belongingness'. One important feature of conformity is that we're influenced by a group because, psychologically, we feel we belong to it; this is why a group's norms are relevant standards for our own attitudes and behaviour. The DPDM emphasises the *interpersonal* aspects of conformity experiments, which could just as easily occur between individuals as group members.

The *self-categorisation approach* suggests that in Sherif's (1935) experiment, for example, participants assumed that the autokinetic effect was real, and expected to agree with each other. In support of this, it's been shown that when participants discover that the autokinetic effect is an illusion, mutual influence and convergence cease – the need to agree at all is removed (Sperling, 1946). If, however, we believe that there is a correct answer, and we're uncertain what it is, then only those whom we categorise as belonging to 'our' group will influence our judgements.

Social influence occurs, then, when we see ourselves as belonging to a group and possessing the same characteristics and reactions as other group members. Turner (1991) calls this kind of self-categorisation, in which group membership is relevant, *referent social influence* (RSI). What's important isn't the validation of physical reality or the avoidance of social disapproval, but the upholding of a group norm: people are the source of information about the appropriate ingroup norm. (See Key Study 26.4.)

According to Fiske (2004), a social *categorisation approach* sees the NSI/SIS distinction as (another) false dichotomy (see Key Study 26.3), since 'information is intrinsically social'.

Ask Yourself

- What do you understand Fiske to mean when she says that 'Information is intrinsically social'? (A look back at Chapter 3 should offer you some clues.)

Key Study 26.4

Knowing what to think by knowing who you are (Abrams *et al.*, 1990)

- Abrams *et al.* replicated Sherif's experiment with Psychology students, but manipulated categorisation: stooges were introduced as students at a nearby university, but were either fellow Psychology students or students of ancient history.
- Convergence only occurred when others were categorised as being equivalent to self, that is, a member of the ingroup (fellow Psychology students). So self-categorisation may set limits on ISI.
- It should also set limits on NSI since individuals will presumably have a stronger desire to receive rewards, approval and acceptance from those categorised in the same way as themselves than from those categorised differently.
- Using the Asch paradigm but again manipulating categorisation, Abrams *et al.* found that conformity exceeded the usual level of 32 per cent in the ingroup condition, but was greatly below this level in the outgroup condition.

Conformity, aggression and the internet

Every day, millions of internet users post aggressive online comments on participatory social media platforms (such as Facebook, YouTube) or blogs in order to voice public criticism, personal indignation or simply to let off steam. Rosner and Kramer (2016) attempted to identify the factors and disentangle the mechanisms that affect people to use aggressive language online:

- Based on *deindividuation theory* (Festinger *et al.*, 1952), *anonymity* is a key influencing factor. The experience of anonymity may foster aggressive behaviour because it makes people feel less inhibited in cyberspace than offline (the '*online disinhibition effect*': Suler, 2004). This may lead to 'benign' or 'toxic' effects – depending on social group norms.
- *Theories of social influence* and *self-categorisation* (including Turner's RSI) argue that we are affected by the social behaviour and social norms of others with whom we expect to agree and/or are fellow ingroup members.
- Users are most likely to use aggressive language when there is a *combination* of anonymity and *aggressive social group norms*.

Their experiment is described in Key Study 26.5.

Key Study 26.5

Verbal venting on the internet: why does it happen? (Rosner and Kramer, 2016)

- This German study involved a laboratory experiment with a 2x2 between-subjects design in order to identify the effects of: (i) *anonymity* (commenting without registration versus commenting with private Facebook account); (ii) the effects of *social group norms* (represented by aggressive versus non-aggressive peer comments); and (iii) their *interaction effects* on participants' aggressive language use when placing a comment on a blog.
- The researchers created a fake website for football fans and planted a false news story stating that people would no longer be able to stand at matches. (At the time, the issue about banning standing terraces was being hotly debated in Germany.)
- The results showed that anonymity on its own *didn't* affect the use of aggressive language in online comments: there was no difference between participants who had commented with the anonymous WordPress guest account and those who had used their Facebook account.
- Participants were influenced by the tone of other users (ostensibly other football fans) and used significantly more aggressive expressions when the group norm was aggressive than when it wasn't. This is a case of online comments affecting *behaviour* (not just attitudes/opinions).
- There was *interaction* between anonymity and group norm: participants exposed to an aggressive norm used more aggressive language when they were anonymous – but only at the 10 per cent significance level. Others' aggressive behaviour had a *greater* impact than anonymity in an online setting; they are demonstrating the *aggressive social norm*.
- Contrary to what RSI would have predicted, identification with other users *didn't* affect language use: with *high perceived similarity*, the group was seen as a homogeneous union, and with *low perceived similarity*, the aggressive norm proved more powerful. Also, the disinhibiting effects of anonymity proved *more* powerful than perceived similarity.

MINORITY INFLUENCE

Majority or minority influence in Asch-type experiments?

Typically, the findings from experiments using the Asch paradigm have been interpreted as showing the impact of a (powerful) majority on the (vulnerable) individual (who's usually in a minority of one). While the stooges are, numerically, the majority, Asch himself was interested in the social and personal conditions that induce individuals to resist group pressure. (In 1950s' USA, this group pressure took the form of McCarthyism: see above.)

Spencer and Perrin (1998) ask if reports of Asch's experiments have overstated the power of the majority to force minority individuals to agree with obviously mistaken judgements. Indeed, Moscovici and Faucheux (1972) argued that it's more useful to think of the naïve participant as the majority (s/he embodies the 'conventional', self-evident 'truth') and the stooges as the minority (they reflect an unorthodox, unconventional, eccentric and even outrageous viewpoint). This corresponds to the distinction between the ingroup and the outgroup, respectively: Moscovici wanted to demonstrate the conditions under which people actually conform to the outgroup. In Asch's experiments, this minority/outgroup influenced the majority 32 per cent of the time, and it's those participants remaining independent who are actually the conformists!

Is the majority always right?

Looked at from Moscovici and Faucheux's perspective, Asch-type experiments suggest how new ideas may come to be accepted (they explain *innovation*), rather than providing evidence about maintenance of the *status quo*. If groups always followed a majority decision rule ('the majority is always or probably right, so best go along with it'), or if social influence were about the inevitable conforming to the group, where would innovation come from? (Spencer and Perrin, 1998: see Focus 26.2.)

According to Moscovici (1976), there's a *conformity bias* in this area of research, such that all social influence is seen as serving the need to adapt to the *status quo* for the sake of uniformity and stability (the 'tyranny of the majority': Martin and Hewstone, 2001; Wood, 2000). However, change is sometimes needed to adapt to changing circumstances, and this is very difficult to explain given the conformity bias. Without active minorities, social and scientific innovations would simply never happen (van Avermaet, 1996).

How do minorities exert an influence?

Moscovici (1976) reanalysed the data from one of Asch's (1955) experiments, in which he varied the proportion of neutral to critical trials. In the original experiment this proportion was 1:2 (see Focus 26.1). When the proportion was 1:6, the conformity rate was 50 per cent, but when it was 4:1 it dropped to 26.2 per cent.

Ask Yourself

- Try to account for these findings.
- Why should conformity rate *increase* as the ratio of neutral to critical trials *decreases*, but *decrease* when it *increases*?

Moscovici interpreted these findings in terms of *consistency*. When there were more critical than neutral trials (the ratio *decreases*), the stooges (who embody the minority viewpoint) appear more consistent as a group, and this produces a higher conformity rate. They're more often agreeing with each other about something unconventional or novel, which makes it more likely they'll change the views of the majority (as represented by the naïve participant).

Key Study 26.6

Blue/green colour slide experiment (Moscovici *et al.*, 1969)

- Moscovici *et al.* used groups of six participants, of whom four were naïve and two were stooges. The stooges played the role of the minority. Before the experiment began, participants' colour vision was tested. They all passed. This meant that the naïve participants couldn't explain the stooges' wrong answers by claiming they were colour blind.
- All the participants gave their answers out loud. The stooges sat either in the first and second position, or first and fourth.
- On 36 separate trials, slides that were clearly blue (based on a *control* condition comprised of six naïve participants) – but which differed in brightness – were presented on a screen.
- In the *consistent* condition, the stooges called it green every time. This yielded a 'green' response rate of over 8 per cent among the naïve participants. In the *inconsistent* condition, the stooges answered 'green' 24 times and 'blue' 12 times. This time, the green responses were made 1.25 per cent of the time. This was a significant difference. 32 per cent of naïve participants gave at least one green response.
- There were really two types of group: one where nobody was influenced by the minority and one where several were influenced. Where the stooges sat made no difference.

Moscovici *et al.*'s experiment clearly showed that a consistent minority can affect the judgements made by the majority. Although the minority doesn't have a numerical advantage, their consistent behavioural style makes them influential. In conformity experiments, the influence of the (numerical) majority is evident

from the start; but minority influence only begins to show after a while.

However, consistency doesn't necessarily have to involve repeating the same response. Nemeth *et al.* (1974) replicated the Moscovici *et al.* experiment, but added two conditions: the stooges said 'green' on half the trials and 'green-blue' on the other half. In the *random* condition, the green and green-blue responses were randomly distributed across the trials (there was no consistency in their responses). In the *correlated* condition, whether they said green or green-blue depended on the brightness of the slide (so, there was still a pattern to their responses).

Compared to a no-influence *control* condition, the random condition had no effect. But in the correlated condition, almost 21 per cent of the responses were wrong (minority) answers. Where stooges consistently repeated the green response, there was no minority influence. In other words, there's more to minority influence than just consistency: it also matters how the majority interprets the minority's answers, which must relate to the stimulus in some predictable way. In Nemeth *et al.*'s study, it was the brightness of the slide that counted.

Minority influence is achieved not so much by a particular style of behaviour in the group, but more by a combination of attributes and behaviour (Smith, 1995). Moscovici (1980) proposes that while majorities impose their views through directly requiring compliance (which often requires 'surveillance'), minorities use more *indirect* means to achieve a more lasting conversion.

Focus 26.2 The importance of consistency and other factors in minority influence

According to Hogg and Vaughan (1998), consistency has five main effects:

1. It disrupts the majority norm, producing uncertainty and doubt.
2. It draws attention to itself as an entity.
3. It conveys the existence of an alternative, coherent point of view.
4. It demonstrates certainty and an unshakeable commitment to a particular point of view.
5. It shows that the only solution to the current conflict is the minority viewpoint.

Minorities are more efficient if they:

- are seen to have made significant personal/material sacrifices (*investment*)
- are perceived as acting out of principle rather than ulterior motives (*autonomy*)
- display a balance between being 'dogmatic' (rigid) and 'inconsistent' (*flexible*)
- are seen as being similar to the majority in terms of age, gender and social category, particularly if they're categorised as part of the ingroup.

As Gardikiotis (2013) points out, minority members sometimes need to negotiate their ideas with the majority. Flexible negotiation entails a moderate style and includes making compromises, while rigid negotiation entails a more extreme style; the former is usually more effective. An inflexible minority can be more easily discounted, especially when the minority's psychological characteristics are significant: they could be seen as responsible for the inflexibility.

Ask Yourself

- Can you relate the importance of consistency to Kelley's covariation model of attribution? (See Chapter 23.)

When minority group members *consistently* adopt a unique (non-majority, unconventional) response (that is, there's *low consensus*), this is likely to lead majority members to make an *internal/dispositional attribution* (they sincerely believe in what they say).



Figure 26.5 Scene from *Twelve Angry Men*, starring Henry Fonda as the only dissenter in an (all-male) jury. He succeeds in overturning an 11-to-1 majority favouring a guilty verdict (see www.filmsite.org/twelve.html)

According to Wood *et al.* (1994), minority influence most often occurs *privately* – that is, on measures that protect the converted majority individuals from appearing publicly to abandon their majority position. They might not even admit it to themselves (Fiske, 2004). For the same reason, influence is often *indirect*, emerging on issues merely *related* to the controversial issues or *delayed* beyond the immediate context (Crano, 2000).

Are minority and majority influence different processes?

According to Moscovici's (1976, 1980) *conversion theory*, minority and majority influence are *qualitatively different*

processes. While being faced with a counter-attitudinal majority (one that holds a different/opposing opinion) leads to *compliance* based on *comparison* (see above), a counter-attitudinal *minority* leads to *conversion* based on a *validation* process. (This is equivalent to *internalisation*.) Validation involves focusing on the content of the message in order to understand exactly what's being said, with attitude change occurring mainly unconsciously, indirectly and gradually.

According to Moscovici, we actually tend to think longer and harder about a minority argument precisely because it's unusual: minority opinions demand more – and more elaborate – cognitive processing. However, according to Mackie's (1987) *objective-consensus approach*, it's a counter-attitudinal *majority* that requires greater cognitive processing: it breaks consensus expectations (we expect that most people will agree with us) and this motivates us to analyse the argument in order to understand the discrepancy.

Martin and Hewstone's (2008) *source-context-elaboration model* proposes that both majority and minority can lead to more (or less) thinking, depending on the cognitive demands of the influence situation. The question is to what extent the situation in which the attempt to influence us allows or encourages elaboration of the source's message. However, most such situations don't involve either very high or low processing demands; this will tend to favour the systematic processing of only the *minority* arguments.

Research has exposed the *power dimension* of group dynamics. According to Gardikiotis (2013):

... We can think of majority and minority not only in terms of 'us' and 'them' but also in terms of the 'many' and the 'few', the 'normative' versus the 'anti-normative' and so on. Therefore, minority influence exemplifies how psychological research can be simultaneously scientifically rigorous and socially relevant.

OTHER GROUP PROCESSES

Risky shift

Based on the traditional interpretation of conformity studies as being concerned with majority influence and with how the *status quo* is maintained, the common-sense prediction is that groups, relative to individuals, will be more cautious and conservative. Convergence towards a group mean in Sherif's experiment is a clear demonstration of this prediction. However, Stoner (1961) found the *opposite* to be true. He presented participants with 12 decision dilemmas faced by hypothetical people, and their task was to advise the person about how much risk to take. Initially this was done individually, then in groups of about five.

To everyone's amazement, the group decisions were usually *riskier* than the individuals'. In other words, the group advised the hypothetical person to take a greater risk than the average of the individuals' advice (*the risky shift phenomenon*). Stoner sparked a wave of research into group decision-making, which initially found considerable support for risky shift, involving people of varying ages, occupations and from 12 different countries. However, it was eventually found that risky shift wasn't universal after all. It was possible to present decision dilemmas on which people became *more cautious* after discussion (Myers, 1994). So, is there a general principle that will predict how risky or cautious people's advice will be?

Group polarisation

One of the most robust findings in Social Psychology is that when group members with similar initial attitudes engage in group discussion to achieve agreement about difficult decisions, the discussion *strengthens* the average individual inclinations (Cooper *et al.*, 2004). For this reason, risky shift came to be seen as part of a much wider phenomenon called *group polarisation* (GP) (Moscovici and Zavalloni, 1969). This is the tendency for groups to make decisions that are more extreme than the mean of individuals' initial positions, in the direction already favoured by that mean (Myers and Lamm, 1975; Wetherell, 1987). So, groups are likely to adopt more *extreme* views than individual members, but this can be in either a riskier or a more cautious direction. Why does it occur?

- According to Brown (1986), the mere *exchange of information* about which members made which decisions can produce GP. Group members may point out relevant information that others have missed, exposing individuals to supportive arguments they might not previously have thought of. This relates to ISI.
- Group members wish to define their identity more positively and distinctively, in contrast to members of other groups whom they might expect to adopt more average positions (Turner, 1991). This is related to NSI.
- Several studies suggest that *social categorisation processes* also play a significant role in GP. It seems to occur through three steps: (i) categorisation of self as a member of a group (the ingroup); (ii) identification of the prototypical characteristics, behaviours and norms of the ingroup that differentiate it from other (out)groups; and (iii) stereotyping the self as a member of the ingroup (Cooper *et al.*, 2004). According to Hewstone and Martin (2012), juries clearly show GP, as well as majority and minority influence.

Groupthink

Groupthink (Janis, 1971, 1982) is an example of how group decisions may become very extreme. Groupthink is defined as a mode of thinking in which the desire to reach unanimous agreement overrides the motivation to adopt proper, rational, decision-making procedures. Using archive material (people's retrospective accounts and content analysis), Janis analysed how the decisions were taken that led to certain major political/military fiascos, such as Pearl Harbor (1941), the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba (1961) which led to the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), and the Vietnam War.

It's been suggested that groupthink is merely a specific instance of risky shift, in which a group that already tends towards making risky decisions polarises, through discussion, to an even riskier one (Myers and Lamm, 1975). According to Levine and Moreland (1998), it's an extreme form of problems associated with the failure to exchange information (or, at least, different views) among group members. Janis believes that groupthink stems from an excessively cohesive, close-knit group, the suppression of dissent in the interests of group harmony and a directive leader who signals what decisions s/he favours. According to Hewstone and Martin (2012):

... In essence, groupthink constitutes an extreme form of normative influence, where the norm to reach and maintain consensus and harmony within the group completely eliminates any informational influence that could show how disastrous the group's intended decision is likely to be.

CONCLUSIONS: CONFORMITY – GOOD or BAD?

Ask Yourself

- Is conformity always and necessarily desirable, and is failure to conform always and necessarily undesirable?

Sometimes, dissent is just an expression of disagreement, a refusal to 'go along with the crowd' (Maslach *et al.*, 1985). On other occasions, it's more creative or constructive, as when someone suggests a better solution to a problem. A refusal to 'go along with the crowd' may be an attempt to remain independent as a *matter of principle* (what Willis, 1963, calls *anticonformity*), and may betray a basic fear of a loss of personal identity.

According to Zimbardo and Leippe (1991), in most circumstances conformity serves a valuable social purpose, it 'Lubricates the machinery of social interaction [and] enables us to structure our social behaviour and predict the reactions of others'.

For most people, though, the word ‘conformity’ has a negative connotation. As a result, it’s implicitly assumed that independence is ‘good’ and conformity is ‘bad’, a value judgement made explicit by Asch (1952). However, conformity can be highly functional, helping us to satisfy social and non-social needs, as well as being necessary (at least to a degree) for social life to proceed at all.

Since each of us has a limited (and often biased) store of information on which to make decisions, other people can often provide valuable additional information and expertise. Conforming to others under these circumstances may be a rational judgement. However, while conformity can help preserve harmony, ‘Failure to speak our minds against dangerous trends or attitudes (for example, racism) can easily be interpreted as support’ (Krebs and Blackman, 1988).

In the context of his famous obedience studies, Milgram showed that the presence of two defiant peers significantly reduced the obedience rate among naïve participants, and he wrote an article (1965) called ‘Liberating effects of group pressure’ (see Chapter 27).

Also, whether conformity is considered good or bad is a matter of *culture*. In *individualist* cultures, people are often distressed by the possibility that others can influence their behaviour against their will: they prefer to believe they’re in control of their destiny. But in *collectivist* cultures, adjusting one’s behaviour to fit the requests and expectations of others is highly valued, and sometimes even a moral imperative (Fiske *et al.*, 1998); conformity is seen as necessary for social functioning, rather than a sign of weakness (Nagayama Hall and Barongan, 2002).

Chapter Summary

- **Social influence** can be **active** and **deliberate** (as in persuasive communication and obedience) or **passive** and **non-deliberate** (as in social facilitation and conformity). A common feature of all social influence is the concept of a **social norm**.
- Definitions of **conformity** commonly refer to **group pressure**, whether the group is a **membership** or a **reference** group.
- In Sherif’s experiment using the **autokinetic effect**, individual estimates **converged** to form a group norm.
- Asch criticised Sherif’s use of an ambiguous task, and in his own experiments used a comparison of lines task for which there was a correct answer.
- Asch found that the **unanimity of the majority** is crucial, not its size. The presence of a **supporter** or **dissenter** reduces conformity, because the majority is no longer unanimous.
- Conformity is increased when the task is made more difficult (more ambiguous), and reduced when participants give their answer anonymously.
- Replications of Asch’s experiment have produced higher or lower rates of conformity according to when and where they were conducted. Both **socio-historical** and **cultural factors** seem to play a part.
- Asch’s findings are usually interpreted as demonstrating **majority influence**. But Moscovici believes that the stooge majority should be thought of as embodying unconventional, minority beliefs, and that conformity experiments show how new ideas come to be accepted (**innovation**).
- One way in which **minority influence** works is by displaying **consistency**, together with **investment**, **autonomy**, and a balance between **rigidity** and **flexibility**.
- Two major motives for conformity are the need to be right (**informational social influence/ISI**) and the need to be accepted by others (**normative social influence/NSI**).
- ISI is related to Sherif’s **social reality hypothesis** and Festinger’s **social comparison theory** and is demonstrated through **internalisation/true conformity**. NSI is linked to **compliance**.
- ISI and NSI aren’t opposed forms of influence, but the **dual process dependency model (DPDM)** tends to emphasise the **interpersonal** aspects of conformity experiments. In contrast, **referent social influence/RSI** stresses the importance of **group membership** and **self-categorisation**.
- According to Moscovici, minority and majority influence are **qualitatively different** processes.
- Evidence for the **risky shift phenomenon** is mixed. It has come to be seen as part of **group polarisation/GP**, in which group decisions tend to become more extreme than the mean of individuals’ initial positions.
- One demonstration of GP is **groupthink**, which stems from excessively cohesive groups with a directive leader.
- While **independence** is often seen as preferable to conformity, conformity also serves an important social function. Milgram has shown how it can have liberating effects in an obedience situation.

Links with Other Topics/Chapters

- Chapters 22, 24 and 27 → Other examples of active social influence apart from *obedience* include *impression management*, *persuasive communication*, *propaganda* and *advertising*
- Chapter 31 → *Social loafing* and *social facilitation* are both forms of indirect/passive social influence relevant to the *Social Psychology of sport*

- Chapter 47 → The finding that conformity is generally higher in *collectivist cultures* demonstrates the importance of cross-cultural research in general, and the need to counteract *ethnocentrism* and *Eurocentrism* in particular
- Chapter 25 → Self-categorisation and intergroup relationships are crucial for understanding *prejudice and discrimination*

Recommended Reading

- Asch, S.E. (1952) *Social Psychology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Hewstone, M. & Martin, R. (2012) Social Influence. In M. Hewstone, W. Stroebe & K. Jonas (eds) *An Introduction to Social Psychology* (5th edition). Oxford: BPS/Blackwell.
- Milgram, S. (1992) *The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments* (2nd edition). New York: McGraw-Hill. Also relevant to Chapter 27.
- Turner, J.C. (1991) *Social Influence*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Useful Websites

- <http://facultystaff.richmond.edu/~dforsyth/gd/> (University of Richmond, Virginia: Group Dynamics Resource Page)
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asch_conformity_experiments (Asch conformity experiments)
- <https://www.verywellmind.com/the-asch-conformity-experiments-2794996>