

Conformity and Obedience

Suppose you have a test scheduled for Friday in your psychology class. In preparation, you study hard in the evenings leading up to the test. Then on Thursday, a classmate asks that the test be moved to Monday. You sense a wave of support for this request as other class members voice their agreement. But you don't think it is such a good idea. You have a marching band trip planned for the weekend and you'll arrive home late Sunday night, exhausted from the travel and hectic schedule. A Monday morning exam is not what you need. The teacher says the test will be moved to Monday if every member of the class votes in favor of the move. When the vote is called for, every hand in the class goes up except yours. Your vote will make the difference. What will you do? Will you vote your beliefs or *conform* to the class' desire to delay?

Conformity is adjusting behavior or thinking to coincide with a group idea or standard. Under what conditions is conformity likely to occur? Social psychologists have been asking—and answering—that question for more than half a century. **Solomon Asch** (1955) conducted one of the more ingenious conformity studies. To get a feel for how this experiment worked, you're going to have to use your imagination.

You're a college student, and you've signed up to participate in a study on perceptual judgment. Arriving at the experiment's location, you are assigned seat 6 (out of 7), and you sit down around a large table with six others. You're told you will be shown sets of cards, and your task is to identify which of the three lines on card B is identical to the one line on card A (see Figure 34.4). The first set is put up. Clearly, the answer is line 2. One by one, every participant in the room agrees. The experimenter records your answers one at a time and then puts up the second set of cards. You think to yourself, "This is easy." Again, you all agree on the same lines. Then comes the third trial, which appears to be just as easy as the first two. You're ready to say "line 2," but to your surprise, the first person gives an answer you think is clearly wrong. Your amazement continues as all five people in front of you choose the wrong line. Now it's your turn, and you must give an answer. What you don't know is that everyone else in the room is *in on* the experiment.

They've all been instructed to lie during the third trial. You, the person in seat 6, are the only participant. What will you say when it is your turn? Will you go along with the majority, or will you trust your judgment and remain true to yourself?

Asch found that if nobody else was in the room, then participants made mistakes on the third trial about 1 percent of the time. However, if the five other people gave a wrong answer before the participant replied, then participants gave the same wrong answer about 33 percent of the time. In essence, roughly one-third were willing to say that up was down to conform to the group.

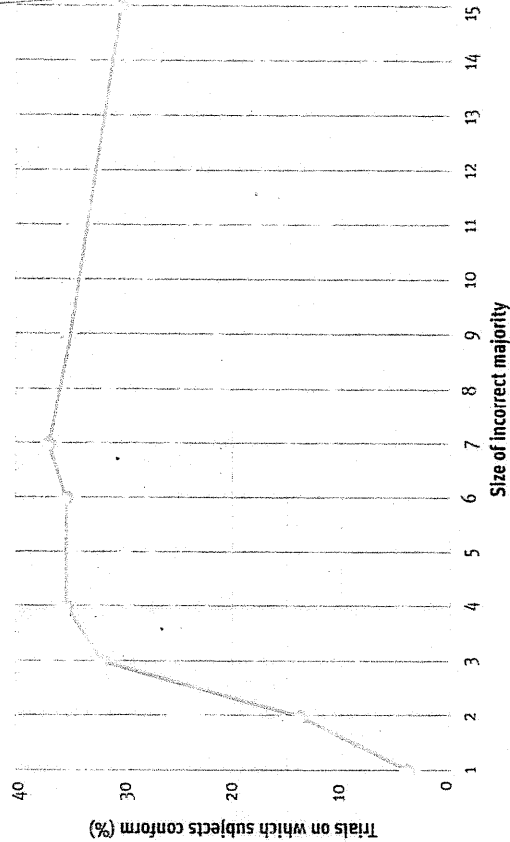
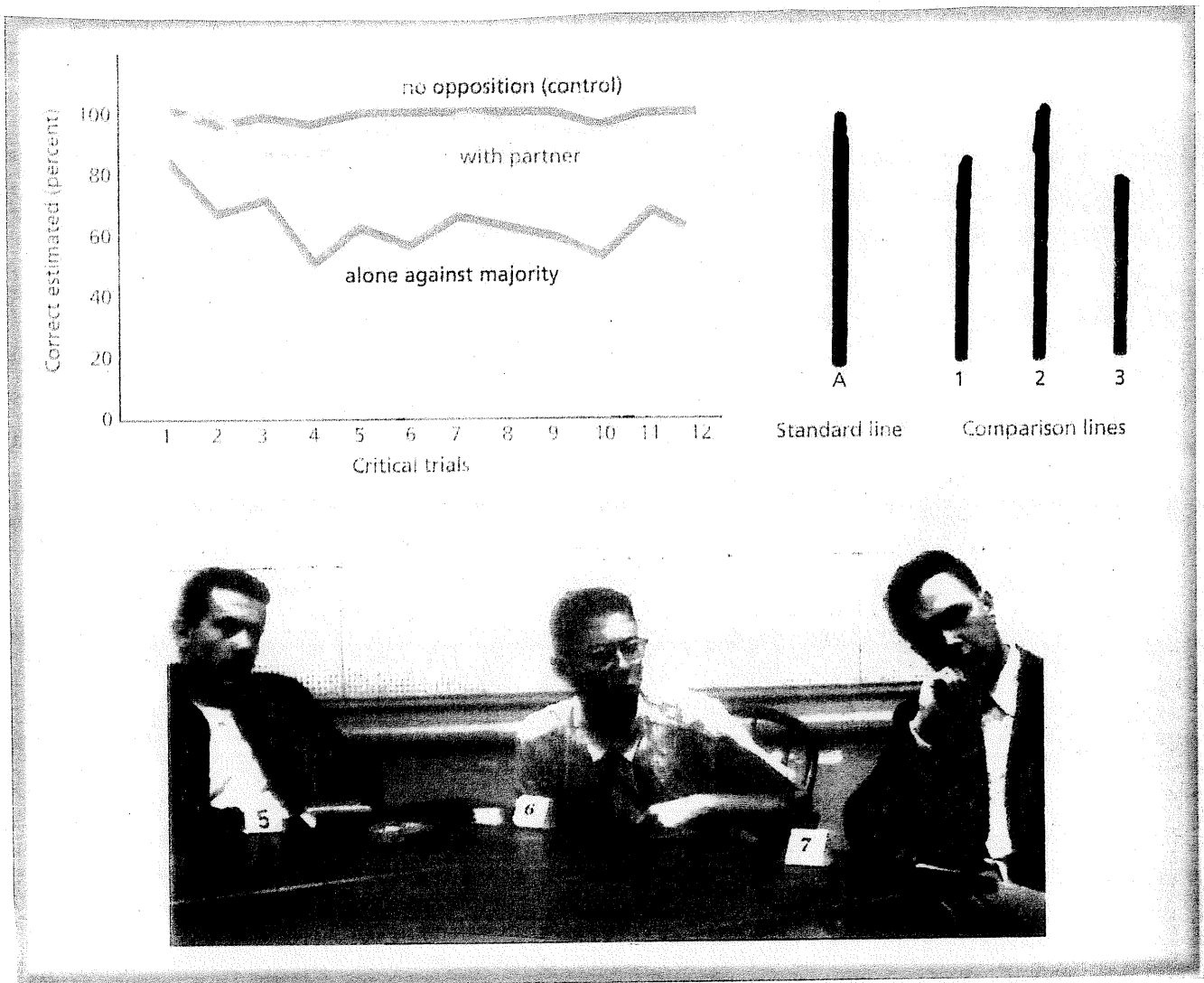


Figure 16.15

Conformity and group size. This graph shows the percentage of trials on which participants conformed as a function of group size in Asch's research. Asch found that conformity became more frequent as group size increased up to about four, and then the amount of conformity leveled off.

SOURCE: Adapted from Asch, S. (1955). Opinion and social pressure. *Scientific American*, 193 (5), 31–35. Based on illustrations by Sara Love. Copyright © 1995 by Scientific American, Inc. All rights reserved.



An interesting follow-up to Asch's study assessed the role of judgment difficulty on conformity (Baron & others, 1996). Picking the longest line out of three is pretty easy, especially when you can stare at it for several minutes. But what about picking a stranger out of a lineup when you have had only a brief look at the person you're supposed to identify? In one study, researchers showed participants two slides. The first showed the man they were to identify, and the second showed a four-man lineup. Participants viewed slide 1 for either 5 seconds (making the decision easy) or half a second (making the decision more difficult). Then they tried to select the correct person in slide 2. Also, half the group was told their judgments were unimportant (that this was simply some preliminary testing) or important (that norms for actual police procedure were being developed and the person making the most accurate identifications would receive \$20). Researchers found that when judgments were easy and were deemed *unimportant*, fewer than 20 percent conformed to the judgments of the other participants. But more than 50 percent conformed to others' judgment when the task was labeled important and difficult. It appears that if being correct matters and we're unsure of our answer, then we are open to the opinions of others.

Factors Influencing Conformity

The basic model of Asch's classic experiment has been used in hundreds of studies exploring the dynamics of conformity (Bond, 2005; Hoffman & others, 2001; R. Bond & Smith, 1996). Why do we sometimes find ourselves conforming to the larger group? There are two basic reasons.



First is our desire to be liked and accepted by the group, which is referred to as **normative social influence**. If you've ever been ridiculed and rejected for going against the grain of a unanimous group, you've had firsthand experience with the pressure of normative social influence. Second is our desire to be right. When we're uncertain or doubt our own judgment, we may look to the group as a source of accurate information, which is called **informational social influence**.

Asch and other researchers identified several conditions that promote conformity, which are summarized in Table 12.2. But Asch also discovered that conformity *decreased* under certain circumstances. For example, having an ally seemed to counteract the social influence of the majority. Subjects were more likely to go against the majority view if just one other participant did so. Other researchers have found that any dissent increases resistance to the majority opinion, even if the other person's dissenting opinion is wrong (Allen & Levine, 1969). Conformity also lessens even if the other dissenter's competence is questionable, as in the case of a dissenter who wore thick glasses and complained that he could not see the lines very well (Allen & Levine, 1971).

Table 12.2

Factors That Promote Conformity

You're more likely to conform to group norms when:

- You are facing a unanimous group of at least four or five people
- You must give your response in front of the group
- You have not already expressed commitment to a different idea or opinion
- You find the task is ambiguous or difficult
- You doubt your abilities or knowledge in the situation
- You are strongly attracted to a group and want to be a member of it

Sources: Asch (1955); Campbell & Fairey (1989); Deutsch & Gerard (1955); Gerard & others (1968); Tanford & Penrod (1984).

Discussion Questions

Answer the following discussion questions in your group BEFORE you create your presentation for the class. Use these questions to ensure that everyone in your group has a thorough understanding of all of the information.

1. How are our actions and decisions impacted by those around us?
2. How could you predict if someone is likely to conform to a group?
3. Do you believe you are more impacted by normative or informational social influence? Why?
4. What types of studies could you use to replicate these findings?
How would you set up this study?
5. How does this impact our lives today? Where have you seen examples of this?

Consequences Activity A

(Independent or Collaborative Learning)

Examine the assigned handout. Then create an illustrated timeline that shows at least two short-term and at least two long-term consequences of the information presented in the handout. Your timeline must have three "time zones": 1) the present (the information presented in the handout), 2) the immediate future (short-term consequences), and 3) the long-range future (long-term consequences).

Assessment Criteria

Your completed assignment must meet all of the following criteria:

- Timeline includes three "time zones": 1) the present (the information presented in the handout), 2) the immediate future (short-term consequences), and 3) the long-range future (long-term consequences).
- Your timeline must include at least two short-term and at least two long-term consequences of the information presented in the handout; timeline entries for each short-term and long-term consequence show both who (and/or what) is affected, and how.
- Timeline tells the story of the handout, including who, what when, where, and why.
- Timeline is illustrated and makes use of three or more of the following: color, texture, symbols, scale, and/or perspective.
- Timeline includes multiple perspectives (points of view).
- Timeline accurately includes ALL of the following terms in a form other students can understand: Independent Variable, Dependent Variable, Experimental Group, Control Group, Normative Social Influence, Informational Social Influence, Conformity, Asch

Oral Presentation Rubric : Complex Instruction

Teacher Name: Ms. Greenwald

Student Name: _____

CATEGORY	4	3	2	1
Props	Group uses visual aids that meet all of the assessment criteria and make the presentation better.	Group uses visual aids which meet most of the assessment criteria and make the presentation better.	Group uses visual aids that do not meet most of the assessment criteria and do not improve the presentation.	Group does not use visual aids OR the visual aids distract from the presentation.
Content	All members show a full understanding of the topic.	All members show a good understanding of the topic.	Some members show a good understanding of parts of the topic.	Group members do not seem to understand the topic very well.
Speaks Clearly	Group speaks loudly, clearly and distinctly through the entire presentation.	Group speaks loudly, clearly and distinctly most of the time	Group speaks loudly, clearly, and distinctly only some of the time.	Group members often mumble or cannot be understood.
Posture and Eye Contact	Stands up straight, looks relaxed and confident. Establishes eye contact with everyone in the room during the presentation.	Stands up straight and establishes eye contact with everyone in the room during the presentation.	Sometimes stands up straight and establishes eye contact.	Slouches and/or does not look at people during the presentation.
Collaboration with Peers	All group members almost always listen to, share with, and support the efforts of others in the group.	Group members usually listen to, share with, and support the efforts of others in the group.	Group members sometimes do not listen to, share with, and support the efforts of others in the group.	Group members rarely listen to, share with, and support the efforts of others in the group.