6.5C: The Asch Experiment- The Power of Peer Pressure

The Asch conformity experiments were a series of studies conducted in the 1950s that demonstrated the power of conformity in groups.

Learning Objectives

• Explain how the Asch experiment sought to measure conformity in groups

Key Points

• The Asch conformity experiments consisted of a group “vision test”, where study participants were found to be more likely to conform to obviously wrong answers if first given by other “participants”, who were actually working for the experimenter.
• The experiment found that over a third of subjects conformed to giving a wrong answer.
• In terms of gender, males show around half the effect of females (tested in same-sex groups). Conformity is also higher among members of an in-group.

Key Terms

• conformity: the ideology of adhering to one standard or social uniformity

Conducted by social psychologist Solomon Asch of Swarthmore College, the Asch conformity experiments were a series of studies published in the 1950s that demonstrated the power of conformity in groups. They are also known as the Asch paradigm. In the experiment, students were asked to participate in a group “vision test.” In reality, all but one of the
participants were working for Asch (i.e. confederates), and the study was really about how the remaining student would react to their behavior.

**Method**

The original experiment was conducted with 123 male participants. Each participant was put into a group with five to seven confederates. The participants were shown a card with a line on it (the reference line), followed by another card with three lines on it labeled a, b, and c. The participants were then asked to say out loud which of the three lines matched in length the reference line, as well as other responses such as the length of the reference line to an everyday object, which lines were the same length, and so on.

Each line question was called a “trial.” The “real” participant answered last or next to last. For the first two trials, the subject would feel at ease in the experiment, as he and the other “participants” gave the obvious, correct answer. On the third trial, all the confederates would start giving the same wrong answer. There were 18 trials in total and the confederates answered incorrectly for 12 of them. These 12 were known as the “critical trials.”

The aim was to see whether the real participants would conform to the wrong answers of the confederates and change their answer to respond in the same way, despite it being the wrong answer.

**Results**

Dr. Asch thought that the majority of people would not conform to something obviously wrong, but the results showed that only 24% of the participants did not conform on any trial. Seventy five percent conformed at least once, 5% conformed every time, and when surrounded by individuals all voicing an incorrect answer, participants provided incorrect responses on a high proportion of the questions (32%). Overall, there was a 37% conformity rate by subjects averaged across all critical trials. In a control group, with no pressure to conform to an erroneous answer, only one subject out of 35 ever gave an incorrect answer.

**Study Variations**

Variations of the basic paradigm tested how many cohorts were necessary to induce conformity, examining the influence of just one cohort and as many as fifteen. Results indicated that one cohort has virtually no influence and two cohorts have only a small influence. When three or more cohorts are present, the tendency to conform increases only modestly. The maximum effect occurs with four cohorts. Adding additional cohorts does not produce a stronger effect.

In terms of gender, males show around half the effect of females (tested in same-sex groups). Conformity is also higher among members of an in-group.

The unanimity of the confederates has also been varied. When the confederates are not unanimous in their judgment, even if only one confederate voices a different opinion, participants are much more likely to resist the urge to conform (only 5% to 10% conform) than when the confederates all agree. This result holds whether or not the dissenting confederate gives the correct answer. As long as the dissenting confederate gives an answer that is different from the majority, participants are more likely to give the correct answer.
This finding illuminates the power that even a small dissenting minority can have upon a larger group. This demonstrates the importance of privacy in answering important and life-changing questions, so that people do not feel pressured to conform. For example, anonymous surveys can allow people to fully express how they feel about a particular subject without fear of retribution or retaliation from others in the group or the larger society. Having a witness or ally (someone who agrees with the point of view) also makes it less likely that conformity will occur.

**Interpretations**

Asch suggested that this reflected poorly on factors such as education, which he thought must over-train conformity. Other researchers have argued that it is rational to use other people’s judgments as evidence. Others have suggested that the high conformity rate was due to social norms regarding politeness, which is consistent with subjects’ own claims that they did not actually believe the others’ judgments and were indeed merely conforming.

Asch Experiment: One of the pairs of cards used in the experiment. The card on the left has the reference line and the one on the right shows the three comparison lines.