

arguments to support their views? Why would the sheer number of opponents or the fact that an authority provides another attitude lead to conformity?

Conformity

Revisiting Asch's line-judgment studies

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5

$$'2 + 2 = 5'$$

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty Four*

BACKGROUND

Obviously, $2+2$ does not equal 5. However, as Orwell suggests, if you find yourself in a world where people believe this to be true, you might start to doubt your judgment. Perhaps you even start to think that this must be true; 'they are right and so I must be wrong'.

For some decades now social psychologists have had a key interest in the factors that lead us to go along with others' views rather than stand strong and resist the pressure to conform. Of particular importance in advancing our knowledge about conformity and resistance were the line-judgment studies by Solomon Asch (1951, 1955). Asch asked why we sometimes abandon our firmly held convictions and bring our attitudes and judgments in line with those of other people, even if we know that they are wrong and we are right. That is, why do we at times yield to conformity pressures and seem to uncritically adopt the majority point of view?

As Asch (1955) writes, his interest in conformity started when he read about classic research by, among others, the psychologist Edward L. Thorndike. In these studies, people are asked to give their opinion on a topic and after doing so they are confronted with an authority figure or group of peers saying the opposite. What typically happens in these studies is that when people are asked again for their opinion, they shift their views and attitudes towards those expressed by the peers or authority. Like many others, Asch was puzzled by this finding. Why would people change their mind when the authority or majority did not even present any

THE LINE-JUDGMENT STUDIES

To address such questions, Asch devised an experimental paradigm that was modelled closely on the experimental set-up in these suggestion studies. However, there was one important difference: in his experiments he created a situation in which various features of the task and the social context made it extremely difficult to resist conformity pressure despite it being very clear that conforming would mean giving an incorrect response.

Perhaps the best way to explain the experiment is to invite you to imagine that you were a participant in one of these studies. After arriving at the laboratory, you find yourself in the company of between seven and nine other participants and you are told that you are all taking part in a psychological study of visual judgment. The experimenter informs you that you will be comparing the length of various lines. You are shown two large white cards (see Figure 5.1). One has a reference line and on the other card you see three comparison lines (labeled A, B and C). Your task is to say out loud which of the three comparison lines is similar in length to the reference line. One of the three lines is clearly the same length as the reference line and the other two are obviously shorter or longer. You think this will be easy.

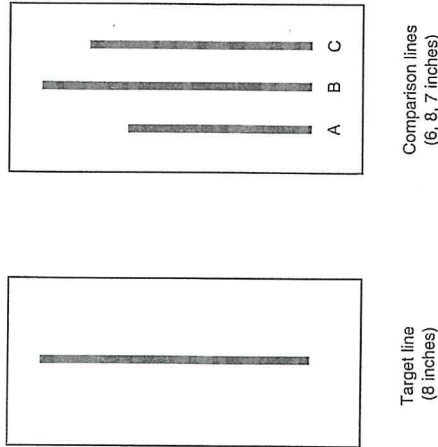


Figure 5.1 The stimuli in Asch's standard line-judgment studies. The participant's (seemingly very easy) task is to say which of the comparison lines (A, B, or C) matches the target line on the left

Participants are seated and they are presented with several trials where they have to call out their answers in the order in which they are seated. You are seated in a position where almost all the other participants have to call out their response before you. The study starts quite uneventfully; everyone agrees which comparison line is similar in length to the reference line. This is getting boring. But then, suddenly, on the third trial, the first participant calls out what is obviously the wrong answer. For example, given lines like those in Figure 5.1, they say 'A' rather than 'B'. They must have made a mistake and you reassure yourself that they cannot be correct by looking again closely at the lines. But then, the second and third person give the same answer as the first person. Number four and five also call out a letter associated with a line that appears to be clearly much longer (or shorter) than the reference line. Are they all blind? Then it is your turn. What do you answer? Should you just go along with their response (even though, privately, you are pretty sure they are wrong), or should you stick to your own judgment even though you are the only one giving this answer?

Unbeknownst to you, the other participants are not actually real participants at all, but are assistants of the experimenter ('confederates') who have been instructed to call out wrong answers on 12 critical trials. The study was not about visual perception, but an investigation into conformity. The results show that it is fairly difficult to withstand conforming in such contexts, even though it is clear that the majority is wrong. There are a number of ways in which the key findings have been reported and, for now, we focus on the way the results are typically reported in the majority of social psychology textbooks. The responses on the critical trials (where the majority clearly gave the wrong response) are presented in Figure 5.2. One popular way of summarizing these findings is to say that 76% of participants conformed at least once to an incorrect answer given by the majority.

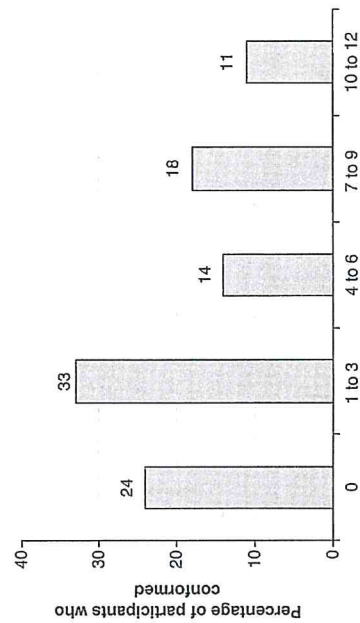


Figure 5.2 Percentage of participants that conformed to the majority on the 12 critical trials in Asch's standard line-judgment study (adapted from Asch, 1955)

To put this number in perspective, Asch also examined conformity under conditions where no confederates were involved and when everyone was a naïve participant who called out the line that they felt best matched the length of the reference line. Under such conditions, hardly anyone gave the wrong response – the task was indeed incredibly easy. On this basis, Asch remarked that 'whereas in ordinary circumstances, individuals matching the lines will make mistakes less than 1 per cent of the time, under group pressure, the minority subjects swung to acceptance of the misleading majority's wrong judgments in 36.8 percent of the selections' (Asch, 1955: 32–3).

Regardless of whether participants conformed or not, it is clear that the experience of being in the minority, and of being confronted with a majority who appeared to be seeing something very different to what the participants were seeing with their own eyes, was unsettling. It must have been a troubling experience to be a participant in this study. Indeed, film footage from the study shows participants squinting and looking at the lines from different angles, in a vain attempt to discover what the majority is seeing and they are not (see Figure 5.3). Asch (1952) himself provides detailed accounts of the changes in non-verbal behavior that an onlooker would witness when observing the naïve participant over the course of the experiment:

After the first one or two disagreements he would note certain changes in the manner and posture of this person. He would see a look of perplexity and bewilderment come over this subject's face at the contradicting judgments of the entire group. Often he becomes more active; he fidgets in his seat and changes the position of his head to look at the lines from different angles. He may turn around and whisper to his neighbor seriously or smile sheepishly. He may suddenly stand up to look more closely at the card. At other times he may become especially quiet and immobile. (1952: 45f)

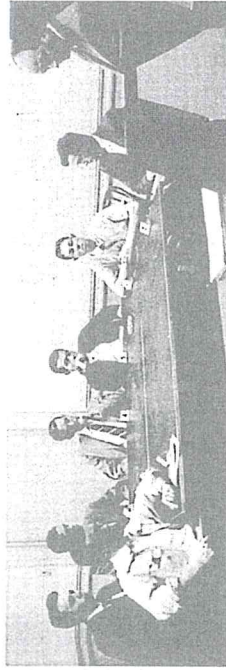


Figure 5.3 The naïve participant (sixth person from the left) is confused but also more alert when other respondents unanimously call out the wrong response (from Asch, 1955: 31)

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FOLLOW-UP STUDIES

From the moment its findings were first published, Asch's study attracted considerable attention. And having obtained such intriguing results, Asch and others set about conducting a series of further studies to examine in greater detail

the context and features of the task that led to more or less conformity. As they are typically understood in textbooks, the studies themselves are seen as evidence of what is termed '*normative influence*'. This analysis suggests that the fear of standing out as different motivates people to compromise their motivation to be accurate and to conform to an obviously incorrect majority.

As it turns out, any fears participants might have had about expressing their deviant opinion were well-founded. In one variant of the line-judgment study, Asch inverted the typical paradigm. This time there was just one confederate who was instructed to call out the wrong answer and the confederate was surrounded by several true participants. Here the (unfortunate) confederate was openly and loudly ridiculed. As a further demonstration of the power of normative influence, Deutsch and Gerard (1955) created a situation in which participants could witness the (incorrect) responses of the majority but were allowed to record their own responses privately (thus eliminating fear of ridicule and, by extension, the power of normative influence). In this variant, the level of conformity plummeted (see also Abrams et al., 1990; Insko et al., 1983). Interestingly, however, conformity was not reduced to zero. For some participants, the power of the situation was enough to convince them that the majority answer was the correct answer after all. In other words, the study provides evidence not only of normative influence (i.e., 'going along' with others) but also of *informational influence* (i.e., being convinced by others).

Other follow-ups focused on other conditions that affect conformity levels. Perhaps unsurprisingly, resistance was enhanced when the majority gave answers that were more blatantly incorrect (Asch, 1955). Asch (1955) was also interested in whether the sheer size of the majority, or the unanimity of its members, enhanced conformity. Here a first series of studies showed that the size of the majority only mattered up to a point: when confronted with just one other confederate giving the wrong responses, participants answered independently and gave the correct response on nearly all trials (all but 3%). When there were two confederates giving wrong answers, conformity to their incorrect judgments increased to 14%. Conformity increased still further to 32% when confronted with a majority of three confederates, but did not increase substantially after that. Indeed, if there were 15 confederates, the rate of conformity was very slightly lower (31%; see Asch, 1955).

Asch also examined to what extent conformity would be affected by the extent to which the majority was unanimous. Results of these studies were even more striking. When there was one other individual who failed to conform to the incorrect majority response (either a confederate or another naïve participant), conformity dropped dramatically. Interestingly too, the other dissenter was perceived especially warmly and positively by participants. From their perspective, it must have been reassuring to be in the company of at least one other person who perceived the lines in the same way. Other studies examined conformity when the dissenter not only disagreed with the majority but also with the participant (i.e., still giving an obviously wrong answer, but a different one to the majority). Here conformity to the majority giving the wrong answer was relatively low (occurring on only 9% of critical trials). This led Asch to conclude that what undermined

conformity was not the direction of dissent (i.e., whether the dissenter was right or wrong), but the fact that dissent had occurred at all.

The studies have also inspired research which aims to establish who is most likely to conform. Do children conform more than adults? Do women conform more than men? Are there differences across countries in levels of conformity? One of Asch's early studies examined conformity among children. He compared the responses of a cohort of younger children (7 to 10 years old) to those of older children (over 10 years old) and found those who were younger conformed more than those who were older. This pattern has since been replicated in more recent studies. For example, in a study that used a slightly different paradigm to Asch, Walker and Andrade (1996) found that the younger participants were the more they conformed: conformity levels were 42% among 6 to 8 year-olds, 38% for 9 to 11 year-olds, 9% for those 12 to 14 years old, and there was no conformity at all among those aged between 15 and 17.

Looking at national differences in conformity in the Asch paradigm, Rod Bond and Peter Smith (1996) conducted a statistical analysis in which they compared conformity levels across countries that promote individualism (e.g., the US) and countries that have a more collectivist orientation (e.g., Hong Kong). Their analysis of 133 Asch line-judgment studies showed that conformity was higher in collectivist countries than in individualist countries, presumably because conformity is more valued in the former than the latter. Their study also revealed a robust effect whereby women were more likely to conform than men. Interestingly too, the researchers found that levels of conformity had dropped significantly over the decades, with conformity levels being relatively low in more recent studies. Indeed, two replication attempts (LaLancette and Standing, 1990; Perrin and Spencer, 1981) using the line-judgment paradigm uncovered only one incident of conformity between them. This is not to say that normative influence principles no longer apply, but it does suggest that the people are more prepared to use their minority voice than they were in the 1950s.

THE IMPACT OF THE LINE-JUDGMENT STUDIES

Asch's program of studies is iconic within social psychology. The studies do not have the same theatricality as some other studies in the same tradition (in particular, Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment and Stanley Milgram's shock experiments; see Chapters 7 and 8) and so have had limited impact within popular culture.¹ Nevertheless, as a result of Asch's elegant, programmatic approach the studies have proved foundational to those interested in the study of conformity. It is hard to imagine an introductory textbook that would not make

¹Asch's studies may have been the inspiration, however, for the pop culture phenomenon of the 'No soap, radio' pranks that emerged in New York in the mid-1950s. In these pranks, a joke-teller and a confederate laugh uproariously at a joke that ends with the nonsense line 'No soap, radio'. The goal was to get the victim to laugh even though the joke makes no sense.

reference to them or a student of psychology who would not have been exposed to the findings and ideas that Asch explored so masterfully.

It is not hard to understand why the Asch study results attracted so much attention. In particular, this is because the results seemed to speak powerfully to instances where people appear to be going along with the majority in a sheep-like fashion. For example, conformity of the form observed in Asch's studies has been argued to underlie behaviors as diverse as going along with Nazi propaganda, succumbing to eating disorders such as bulimia (where people are not able to resist the majority pressure for thinness; Crandall, 1988), and engaging in football hooliganism and other types of crowd violence (Le Bon, 1895). As Gustave Le Bon had argued half a century earlier, Asch's studies appear to show that, in a group or crowd, the individual is unable to resist peer pressure and becomes a slave to the will of the collective. In Le Bon's words: 'an individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will' (1895: 13). In this view, conformity is seen as an irrational influence that leads people to conform in a mindless way. In this vein, Serge Moscovici later commented: 'the Asch studies are one of the most dramatic illustrations of conformity, of blindly going along with the group, even when the individual realizes that by doing so he turns his back on reality and truth' (1985: 349). Conformity is thus typically associated with the dark side of humanity: it reveals people's inability to resist even when they know the majority is wrong – to the extent that they are not even able to resist the pressure to agree with something as silly as an assertion that $2 + 2 = 5$.

BEYOND THE ASCH STUDIES

ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS AND FINDINGS

But is it really the case that conformity is a reflection of weakness and cowardice. Is it really sheep-like to take seriously what other people say even when they are clearly wrong? Put differently, can we see conformity in the Asch line-judgment experiments as normal, or perhaps even as a sensible thing to do? And is it the case that those who conformed were mindlessly and blindly following the majority? To answer that question, we need to look more closely at the specifics of these studies and reflect on what it must have been like to be a participant in them.

In this regard, it is particularly revealing to read what participants said when asked after the study to elaborate on what it was that dictated their responses. Indeed, these data are every bit as informative as details of the levels of conformity to the wrong majority responses. In line with the reasoning that conformity resulted from normative influence, many of those who conformed spontaneously mentioned that they went along with the group because – even though they did not think the majority was right – they did not want to appear foolish or to be the odd one out. However, there were also other reasons why people conformed. Some mentioned they did not want to 'spoil the study results' (Asch, 1955: 33) and believed they were acting in everyone's interest by not rocking the boat and going

along with the majority. Still others believed that the first person to call out the wrong response must have a visual impairment. When confederates 2 and 3 also called out the wrong response, they simply concluded that these participants were conforming, possibly because they did not want to make the first person to look like a fool. Interestingly, these participants thus interpreted the context as one where everyone was conforming to the wrong response of the first person. For all these participants, though, their privately held beliefs regarding the right response differed from their public responses: they trusted their own eyes, but as a result of the situational context, decided it was better to comply with the majority. Others, though, not only complied with the majority, but also appeared to change their privately held belief as to what the correct response was (thereby displaying so-called *conversion*). For example, they believed that they themselves were victims of optical illusions, and that the majority was actually right – simply because it was inconceivable that so many people could be wrong. They convinced themselves that 'I must be wrong and they must be right'.

Significantly too, although Asch himself also considered in detail the responses of those who resisted majority pressure, those responses are less often summarized in social psychological textbooks. So what exactly did those who resisted say? Asch reports two classes of individuals: those who were confident of their own judgment and appeared to respond without much consideration of the majority, and those who believed that the majority may be correct, but could not stop themselves calling out what they saw. For example, Asch (1952) describes the debrief interview with Participant 1 who resisted conformity on all critical trials. When the experimenter asks after the study 'who do you suppose was right?' this participant responds: 'There was absolutely no doubt in my mind, I still think I am right'. When asked: 'Do you think everyone else is wrong', this participant said: 'Well, if I didn't I wouldn't have given these answers. Right now I have all the confidence in my judgment. I still don't understand how this difference could have come about' (1952: 466). In other words, those who resisted appeared to be more concerned about being correct and about being true to their own perceptions. This did not mean that they were not deeply disturbed by the experience. For example, Asch (1952: 466) notes that the participant described above, who resisted conformity on all critical trials, walked over to the experimenter at the end of the discussion and asked: 'Is there anything wrong with me?' After being given a full debrief, this participant felt a deep sense of relief and he walked out of the room saying: 'This is unlike any experience I have had in my life – I will never forget it as long as I live' (1952: 467).

These accounts provide a number of important insights. In particular, looking at the way that participants explained their responses, it becomes clear that people were actively trying to make sense of the situation by developing different theories as to why the majority was giving these obviously wrong responses. Some of these theories justified conforming (e.g., 'they must all be too polite to disagree with that poor first person who clearly has a visual impairment'), and others justified non-conformity (e.g., 'In this confusing context, the best I can do is just trust my own eye-sight'). It thus appears that accounts that suggest that people were

blindly and passively following the majority are failing to do justice to what the experience must have been like. Participants did not sit back and simply let the majority overwhelm them. Rather, they were critically engaged and tried actively to make sense of the situation in order to develop a theory that would allow them to resolve the highly dissonant experience of contradiction between what they were seeing and how the majority was responding (for a related discussion of the strength of such dissonance, see Chapter 3).

To understand the nature of those theories that participants developed, it is instructive to look more closely at the specifics of the studies. Two aspects of the experimental context in particular are important: (a) the content of the task, and (b) the opposition by the majority. In relation to the first aspect, the task is one where (a) the participant knows that only one response is right and it appears clear which response is correct, (b) whether the right or wrong response is given does not appear consequential and does not necessarily reflect personal values, and (c) participants are isolated when giving responses and an immediate response is required, making it impossible to establish why the majority is giving the wrong response. Let us discuss these characteristics in turn and consider how they may have affected responses.

By making one response obviously right, and two other responses obviously wrong (see Figure 5.1) a context was created whereby, due to the clarity of the judgment, there was very little need to gather information from others about what the right response would be (a situation very different from that which prevailed in Muzaffer Sherif's earlier autokinetic studies; see Chapter 4). But in everyday life, conformity is rarely an all-or-nothing judgment of this form. Instead, it involves subjective judgments where we can accept some influence from others, but also partially reject it. For example, I might conform to the majority of my friends that a movie we saw together was awful, but might still disagree when discussing whether the special effects were convincing or not. In addition, dissent in this case does not create discomfort because it is easy to accept that one has a different perspective on reality to others. In this regard, it has been pointed out that it is the very obviousness of the answer in the Asch paradigm that led to such high conformity levels (Ross et al., 1976). Participants were almost certainly unprepared for the sheer and utter bizarreness of the situation that they were confronted with. This meant that many participants were probably so overwhelmed by the context, and so poorly equipped to deal with it, that it was easiest for them just to go along with the majority.

As Asch himself mentioned, the simplicity of the set-up also contributed to conformity in another way: "The individual had nothing to 'gain' by acting one way or another; usual considerations of interest were excluded" (1952: 469). This is precisely what one participant mentioned when discussing his responses afterwards. He said: "If it had been a political question, I don't think I'd have agreed if I had a different feeling ... I probably wanted my own ideas, but it was easiest to string along" (Asch, 1952: 471). In line with this point, many have argued (and shown) that conformity levels would be much lower if responses were associated with important outcomes or outcomes that were personally meaningful (Crutchfield, 1955; Hornsey et al., 2003; Jahoda, 1959).

Turning to the nature of the majority, there are a number of interesting observations that can help us understand why it is perhaps not so surprising that participants went along with a majority that was so clearly wrong. Asch himself (1952) certainly did not think that the majority was a force that could be easily ignored. He emphasizes that, once we find ourselves in the midst of a group, we are not indifferent to it and individuals are concerned about what others around them think. He says:

The individual comes to experience a world that he shares with others. He perceives that the surroundings include him, as well as others, and that he is in the same relation to the surroundings as others. He notes that he, as well as others, is converging upon the same object and responding to its identical properties. Joint action and mutual understanding require this relation of intelligibility and structural simplicity. In these terms, the 'pull' toward the group becomes understandable. (1952: 484)

In other words, giving in to majority pressure is not an act of indifference or mindlessness. Quite the opposite: it shows that individuals are *mindful* of the views of others around them. It shows that they are interested in maintaining harmony within the group and willing to go along with what others think is right. This is important because it is precisely through the acceptance of social influence from others that groups are able to function effectively and maintain cohesion. This analysis is consistent with theorizing within the social identity tradition whereby conformity, and social influence more generally, is seen as originating:

In the need of people to reach agreement with others perceived to be interchangeable in respect of relevant attributes (psychological ingroup members in the given situation) in order to validate their responses as correct, appropriate and desirable. (Hogg and Turner, 1987: 150)

Thus, when surrounded by members of the same group who undergo the same experience as oneself, those others become valid sources of information that tell us how to interpret the world (Turner, 1991). In this view, rather than an irrational force that makes people blurt out responses that are obviously wrong, conformity in the Asch line-judgment experiments appears to be an entirely appropriate response. Asch puts it even more strongly when he says: "The group is part of the given conditions. Not to take it into account, not to allow oneself to be in any way affected by it, would be willful" (1952: 484).

THE NEGLECTED IMPORTANCE OF RESISTANCE

A survey of popular social psychology texts suggests that Asch's line-judgment studies are particularly remembered for what they tell us about conformity, not what they tell us about resistance. Especially telling is the fact that they are routinely referred to as 'Asch's conformity studies'. However, closer inspection suggests that the studies generated just as much resistance as conformity. In that sense, it is revealing how results are presented. Often it is stated that 76%

conformed on at least one trial and that about a third conformed on average on critical trials by going along with the majority. What is rarely highlighted is the other side of the coin: 'about one quarter of the subjects were completely independent and never agreed with the erroneous judgment of the majority' (Asch, 1955: 33) or that only about 11% of participants conformed on almost all trials (see Figure 5.2). It thus seems that for every one time a participant conformed, he or she dissented twice. Given this, it seems reasonable to ask why we see the studies as studies of conformity. Why are they not reported as studies providing insight into dissent – as evidence of participants standing strong and going against the majority despite enormous pressure?

This is not a minor point. For resistance is not simply the absence of conformity. Rather, it is a process that is quite different from conformity and guided by different considerations. Yet the idea that individuals are able to resist a majority that is clearly wrong has generally been of little interest to those who typically comment on Asch's work. One possible reason for this is that social psychology in general appears more interested in what makes people conform than in what makes them dissent and show defiance in the face of group pressure (see Jetten and Hornsey, 2011). As Marie Jahoda remarks:

Not only is there widespread consensus among many diagnosticians of the climate of our times that this is an age of conformity; the relevant psychological literature is almost unanimous in its emphasis on conditions accounting for conformity. Actually, there is, of course, ample evidence for the existence of independence not only in common-sense observations but also in every single experiment which rejects the null-hypothesis of independence ... There is a tacit implication in many of these experiments that those insubordinate subjects who are outside the hypothesis-confirming majority are a nuisance. (1959: 99; see also Moscovici, 1976)

Not much has changed in the 60 years since Jahoda made her observation. This is unfortunate for a number of reasons – not least because it appears that by focusing on conformity at the expense of resistance we have come to paint a picture of group life that is incomplete and, at times, plain wrong. Indeed, as Asch showed, resistance is just as common in group life as is conformity (Haslam and Reicher, 2007; Reicher and Haslam, 2006; see Chapters 7 and 8). Moving beyond Asch's studies, this point is also clear when we look around us and tally both acts of conformity and resistance in daily life. Both occur and dissent is just as much part of daily life as conformity.

What is more, we often like and identify with people who are able to withstand conformity pressures and rebel – in particularly when they do not go along with a majority who is obviously wrong or misguided. Consider for example the now classic film and play *Twelve Angry Men* which tells the story of a jury that has to decide whether a defendant is guilty or not. Even though they have not carefully examined the evidence, 11 of the jurors quickly agree that the defendant is guilty. One of the jurors, however, resists going along with this majority and forces the group to carefully check the evidence. By dissenting with the majority despite considerable pressure, as the story unfolds, it is clear that the majority is wrong

and that the dissenter was right in standing firm in his claim that the evidence for a guilty verdict cannot be sustained. As viewers, we identify with the dissenter. He is the hero of the story, and, interestingly, the majority is portrayed as consisting of weak people who are guided by prejudice and an inability to be true to themselves.

There is another reason why it is unfortunate that there has not been more attention paid to the evidence of resistance in the Asch line-judgment studies. This is that, up to the present day, by focusing on the minority who conformed on some trials, we have neglected to explain – or even try to explain – why a majority of participants resisted conforming on a majority of trials. When we focus on conformity instead of dissent, we also focus on understanding uniformity instead of difference, and on passive responding rather than active behavior by group members. As a result, theorizing about dissent and the willingness to stand out is quite underdeveloped and this has led to a failure to understand the way in which groups (and society more broadly) change (see Turner, 2006). Indeed, social change often has its roots in one individual (or a group of people) questioning whether the majority's view of reality is really correct and by standing firm in their belief that it is not.

Yet when one reads (or re-reads) Asch's original reports of his studies it is clear that he was certainly not only interested in conformity. In fact, it is apparent that he warned against portraying people as conforming beings. Thus, he observes:

Current thinking has stressed the power of social conditions to induce psychological changes arbitrarily. It has taken slavish submission to group forces as the general fact and has neglected or implicitly denied the capacity for men for independence, for rising under certain conditions above group passion and prejudice. (Asch, 1952: 451)

Asch's own deliberations provide a much more nuanced view of how he was trying to explore these countervailing processes in his research, and of what he felt were the implications of his work. Thus, it is true that, on the one hand, he expresses alarm about the willingness of participants to go along with a majority that is clearly wrong. As he puts it:

That we have found the tendency to conformity so strong that reasonably intelligent and well-meaning young people are willing to call white black is a matter of concern. It raises questions about our ways of education and about the values that guide our conduct. (1955: 34)

Yet, on the other hand, he finishes the article by reflecting:

Yet anyone inclined to draw too pessimistic conclusions from this report would do to remind her/himself that the capacities for independence are not to be underestimated. (S)he may also draw some consolation from a further observation: those who participated in this challenging experiment agreed nearly without exception that independence was preferable to conformity. (1955: 34)

Indeed, Asch was just as much convinced of the vitality and realness of independence as he was of the power of conformity. Even if we find that people conform, he says:

We should be skeptical, however, of the supposition that the power of social pressure necessarily implies uncritical submission to it: Independence and the capacity to rise above group passion are also open to human beings. (1955: 32)

Nevertheless, it seems that only one half of Asch's message has survived and that the other part has been largely forgotten. His message and purpose has thus been transformed over the years: so that rather than trying to understand the interplay between independence and conformity, consumers of his work have focused solely on people's inclination to conform.

CONCLUSION

So what should one conclude from the Asch line-judgment studies? Of course, the studies tell us about conformity and the confusion one experiences when confronted with a majority that is clearly wrong. But perhaps more important is the question of what this finding tells us about human behavior more generally. Rather than arguing that the findings show us how easily people succumb to peer pressure, we would suggest that the studies inform us instead, first, that it is important for people to be validated by others and, second, that, in many contexts, other people are the most useful and important source of such validation. Both conformity and resistance can be a path toward actively achieving a greater understanding of the world around us and both are therefore equally rational (see Spears, 2010). Again, we can refer to Asch in order to illustrate this point. In the following passage he quotes from the reflections of the astronomer Tycho Brahe upon discovering a new star in 1572:

When according to my habit, I was contemplating the stars in a clear sky, I noticed a new and unusual star, surpassing the other stars in brilliancy, was shining almost directly above my head; and since I had, almost from boyhood, known all the stars of the heavens perfectly (there is no great difficulty in attaining that knowledge), it was quite evident to me that there had never before been any star in that place in the sky, even the smallest, to say nothing of a star so conspicuously bright as this. I was so astonished at this sight that I was not ashamed to doubt the trustworthiness of my own eyes. But when I observed that others, too, on having the place pointed out to them, could see that there was really a star there, I had no further doubts. (quoted in Asch, 1952: 493)

Because we can only know reality by agreeing with others about that reality, is it really that surprising that at times we do not believe our own eyes until others have told us that what we see is true? And, if they seem to be seeing something different – not seeing the star in Tycho Brahe's case – would that not lead us to conclude, over time at least, that 'they must be right and I must be wrong'? As Asch remarks, Tycho Brahe's story tells us that he was profoundly concerned with validating and corroborating what he saw. Indeed, 'had he remained the only one who continued to see the star, he would have been an unhappy man indeed' (1952: 494). Put simply, then, we need other people to tell us that what we are seeing is

right in order for us to understand that it is right. For this reason, to stop listening to others (and to stop conforming) would be the *irrational* thing to do.

FURTHER READING

To get a better feeling for the line-judgment studies, you may want to read Asch's classic reports. The 1952 textbook provides detailed and rich accounts of what participants said after taking part and illustrates well what it must have been like to be a participant in the study. The 1955 paper reflects on what to conclude from the findings and provides considerable food for thought. Both texts show quite clearly that Asch was interested in both conformity and dissent.

If you are interested in social influence processes more broadly and in questions about why people conform, then you need to read Turner's comprehensive overview of the literature.

This book by Moscovici has become a classic in the field and reveals Moscovici's frustration with social psychologists' one-sided interest in conformity.

A similar sentiment to Moscovici was voiced more recently by Spears when he ponders why it is that social psychologists insist on seeing the group as a source of bias and irrationality.

As a counterpoint to the received view, Jetten and Hornsey's edited book includes chapters which show that when it comes to creativity, learning, organizational functioning and so on, dissent, difference, deviance and defiance are just as much a part of group life as conformity and just as essential for good group functioning.

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6

Minority Influence

Revisiting Moscovici's blue-green afterimage studies

Robin Martin and Miles Hewstone

BACKGROUND

Does a majority always overcome a minority, such that people bend their will to the power of the majority, or is it possible for a minority to change the view of the majority? Looking at research on social influence, one might think that the pressures towards conformity mean that the views of the majority will inevitably prevail. Indeed, Asch's classic conformity studies (see Chapter 5) showed that people will publicly agree with the objectively incorrect judgments of a majority on an unambiguous task involving the judgment of line lengths. Moreover, subsequent studies showed that people will conform to the majority for a number of reasons including the desire to be accepted by the majority and therefore not appear to be different (reflecting *social approval*; 'I want to be in the majority group'), and also because people assume that the majority is more likely to be accurate and correct in its judgments than a minority (reflecting *social consensus*: 'many pairs of eyes must be better than just a few').

Up until the late 1960s, research in social psychology was dominated by a focus on the conditions under which a majority can cause individuals to conform to its position – a phenomenon that the French social psychologist Serge Moscovici referred to as a *conformity bias*. However, from the late 1960s, and due especially to Moscovici's own work, researchers began to ask a different question – can a numerical minority influence the attitudes of the majority? As Moscovici noted in his (1976) book *Social Influence and Social Change* it seems likely that the answer must be 'Yes' for the simple reason that if people only conformed to the majority, then new ideas would never emerge, innovations would never occur and society would never change. However, history is replete with individuals (e.g., Galileo, Freud), as well as minority groups (e.g., the Suffragettes, the anti-slavery movement),