

Group Behavior

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson will apply the concepts of psychology to understanding how people behave in groups. An understanding of groups supports your development of self and social awareness skills. In this lesson, you will cover:

1. Conformity

The power of the situation can lead people to conform, or go along with the group, even in the face of inaccurate information. Conformity to group norms is driven by two motivations, the desire to fit in and be liked and the desire to be accurate and gain information from the group.

Solomon Asch conducted several experiments in the 1950s to determine how people are affected by the thoughts and behaviors of other people. In one study, a group of participants was shown a series of printed line segments of different lengths: a, b, and c. Participants were then shown a fourth line segment: x. They were asked to identify which line segment from the first group (a, b, or c) most closely resembled the fourth line segment in length.

Each group of participants had only one true, naïve subject. The remaining members of the group were **confederates** of the researcher. A confederate is a person who is aware of the experiment and works for the researcher. Confederates are used to manipulate social situations as part of the research design, and the true, naïve participants believe that confederates are, like them, uninformed participants in the experiment. In Asch's study, the confederates identified a line segment that was obviously shorter than the target line—a wrong answer. The naïve participant then had to identify aloud the line segment that best matched the target line segment.

How often do you think the true participant aligned with the confederates' response? That is, how often do you think the group influenced the participant, and the participant gave the wrong answer? Asch found that 76% of participants conformed to group pressure at least once by indicating the incorrect line. Conformity is the change in a person's behavior to go along with the group, even if he does not agree with the group. Why would people give the wrong answer? What factors would increase or decrease someone giving in or conforming to group pressure?



TERM TO KNOW

Confederate

A person within an experiment who is aware of the experiment and works for the researcher.

1a. The Asch Effect

The **Asch effect** is the influence of the group majority on an individual's judgment.

What factors make a person more likely to yield to group pressure? Research shows that the size of the majority, the presence of another dissenter, and the public or relatively private nature of responses are key influences on conformity.

- The size of the majority: The greater the number of people in the majority, the more likely an individual will conform. There is, however, an upper limit: a point where adding more members does not increase conformity. In Asch's study, conformity increased with the number of people in the majority—up to seven individuals. At numbers beyond seven, conformity leveled off and decreased slightly.
- The presence of another dissenter: If there is at least one dissenter, conformity rates drop to near zero.
- The public or private nature of the responses: When responses are made publicly (in front of others), conformity is more likely; however, when responses are made privately (e.g., writing down the response), conformity is less likely.

The finding that conformity is more likely to occur when responses are public than when they are private is the reason government elections require voting in secret, so we are not coerced by others.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The Asch effect can be easily seen in children when they have to publicly vote for something. If the teacher asks whether the children would rather have extra recess, no homework, or candy, once a few children vote, the rest will comply and go with the majority. In a different classroom, the majority might vote differently, and most of the children would comply with that majority.

When someone's vote changes if it is made in public versus private, this is known as compliance. Compliance can be a form of conformity. Compliance is going along with a request or demand, even if you do not agree with the request. In Asch's studies, the participants complied by giving the wrong answers, but privately did not accept that the obviously wrong answers were correct.



THINK ABOUT IT

Now that you have learned about the Asch line experiments, why do you think the participants conformed? The correct answer to the line segment question was obvious, and it was an easy task. Researchers have categorized the motivation to conform into two types: normative social influence and informational social influence.



TERM TO KNOW

The Asch Effect

The influence of the group majority on an individual's judgment.

1b. Normative and Informational Social Influence

In **normative social influence**, people conform to the group norm to fit in, to feel good, and to be accepted by the group. However, with **informational social influence**, people conform because they believe the group is competent and has the correct information, particularly when the task or situation is ambiguous. What type of social influence was operating in the Asch conformity studies? Since the line judgment task was unambiguous, participants did not need to rely on the group for information. Instead, participants complied to fit in and avoid ridicule, an instance of normative social influence.

➞ **EXAMPLE** An example of informational social influence may be what to do in an emergency

situation. Imagine that you are in a movie theater watching a film and what seems to be smoke comes in the theater from under the emergency exit door. You are not certain that it is smoke—it might be a special effect for the movie, such as a fog machine. When you are uncertain you will tend to look at the behavior of others in the theater. If other people show concern and get up to leave, you are likely to do the same. However, if others seem unconcerned, you are likely to stay put and continue watching the movie.

How would you have behaved if you were a participant in Asch's study? Many students say they would not conform, that the study is outdated, and that people nowadays are more independent. To some extent this may be true. Research suggests that overall rates of conformity may have reduced since the time of Asch's research. Furthermore, efforts to replicate Asch's study have made it clear that many factors determine how likely it is that someone will demonstrate conformity to the group. These factors include the participant's age, gender, and socio-cultural background.



TERMS TO KNOW

Normative Social Influence

People conform to the group norm to fit in, to feel good, and to be accepted by the group.

Informational Social Influence

People conform because they believe the group is competent and has the correct information, particularly when the task or situation is ambiguous.

2. Stanley Milgram's Experiment

Conformity is one effect of the influence of others on our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Another form of social influence is obedience to authority. **Obedience** is the change of an individual's behavior to comply with a demand by an authority figure. People often comply with the request because they are concerned about a consequence if they do not comply. To demonstrate this phenomenon, we review another classic social psychology experiment.

Stanley Milgram was a social psychology professor at Yale who was influenced by the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi war criminal. Eichmann's defense for the atrocities he committed was that he was "just following orders." Milgram (1963) wanted to test the validity of this defense, so he designed an experiment and initially recruited 40 men for his experiment. The volunteer participants were led to believe that they were participating in a study to improve learning and memory. The participants were told that they were to teach other students (learners) correct answers to a series of test items. The participants were shown how to use a device that they were told delivered electric shocks of different intensities to the learners. The participants were told to shock the learners if they gave a wrong answer to a test item—that the shock would help them to learn. The participants gave (or believed they gave) the learners shocks, which increased in 15-volt increments, all the way up to 450 volts. The participants did not know that the learners were confederates and that the confederates did not actually receive shocks.

In response to a string of incorrect answers from the learners, the participants obediently and repeatedly shocked them. The confederate learners cried out for help, begged the participant teachers to stop, and even complained of heart trouble. Yet, when the researcher told the participant-teachers to continue the shock, 65% of the participants continued the shock to the maximum voltage and to the point that the learner became unresponsive. What makes someone obey authority to the point of potentially causing serious harm to another person?

Several variations of the original Milgram experiment were conducted to test the boundaries of obedience. When certain features of the situation were changed, participants were less likely to continue to deliver shocks. For example, when the setting of the experiment was moved to an office building, the percentage of participants who delivered the highest shock dropped to 48%. When the learner was in the same room as the teacher, the highest shock rate dropped to 40%. When the teachers' and learners' hands were touching, the highest shock rate dropped to 30%. When the researcher gave the orders by phone, the rate dropped to 23%. These variations show that when the humanity of the person being shocked was increased, obedience decreased. Similarly, when the authority of the experimenter decreased, so did obedience.

This case is still very applicable today. What does a person do if an authority figure orders something done? What if the person believes it is incorrect, or worse, unethical? In a study by Martin and Bull, midwives privately filled out a questionnaire regarding best practices and expectations in delivering a baby. Then, a more senior midwife and the supervisor asked the junior midwives to do something they had previously stated they were opposed to. Most of the junior midwives were obedient to authority, going against their own beliefs.



THINK ABOUT IT

- Conduct a conformity study the next time you are in an elevator. After you enter the elevator, stand with your back toward the door. See if others conform to your behavior. Did your results turn out as expected?
- Most students adamantly state that they would never have turned up the voltage in the Milgram experiment. Do you think you would have refused to shock the learner? Looking at your own past behavior, what evidence suggests that you would go along with the order to increase the voltage?



TERM TO KNOW

Obedience

The change of an individual's behavior to comply with a demand by an authority figure.

3. Groupthink

When in group settings, we are often influenced by the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors around us. Whether it is due to normative or informational social influence, groups have power to influence individuals. Another phenomenon of group conformity is **groupthink**. Groupthink is the modification of the opinions of members of a group to align with what they believe is the group consensus. In group situations, the group often takes action that individuals would not perform outside the group setting because groups make more extreme decisions than individuals do. Moreover, groupthink can hinder opposing trains of thought. This elimination of diverse opinions contributes to faulty decisions by the group.

IN CONTEXT

There have been several instances of groupthink in the U.S. government. One example occurred when the United States led a small coalition of nations to invade Iraq in March 2003. This invasion occurred because a small group of advisors and former President George W. Bush were convinced that Iraq represented a significant terrorism threat with a large stockpile of weapons of mass destruction at its disposal. Although some of these individuals may have had some doubts about the

credibility of the information available to them at the time, in the end, the group arrived at a consensus that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and represented a significant threat to national security.

It later came to light that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction, but not until the invasion was well underway. As a result, 6000 American soldiers were killed and many more civilians died. How did the Bush administration arrive at their conclusions? Do you see evidence of groupthink?

Why does groupthink occur? There are several causes of groupthink, which makes it preventable. When the group is highly cohesive, or has a strong sense of connection, maintaining group harmony may become more important to the group than making sound decisions. If the group leader is direct and makes his opinions known, this may discourage group members from disagreeing with the leader. If the group is isolated from hearing alternative or new viewpoints, groupthink may be more likely. How do you know when groupthink is occurring?

There are several symptoms of groupthink including the following:

- perceiving the group as invulnerable or invincible—believing it can do no wrong
- believing the group is morally correct
- self-censorship by group members, such as withholding information to avoid disrupting the group consensus
- the quashing of dissenting group members' opinions
- the shielding of the group leader from dissenting views
- perceiving an illusion of unanimity among group members
- holding stereotypes or negative attitudes toward the out-group or others' with differing viewpoints

Given the causes and symptoms of groupthink, how can it be avoided? There are several strategies that can improve group decision making including seeking outside opinions, voting in private, having the leader withhold position statements until all group members have voiced their views, conducting research on all viewpoints, weighing the costs and benefits of all options, and developing a contingency plan.



TERM TO KNOW

Groupthink

The modification of the opinions of members of a group to align with what they believe is the group consensus.

4. Group Polarization

Another phenomenon that occurs within group settings is group polarization. **Group polarization** is the strengthening of an original group attitude after the discussion of views within a group. That is, if a group initially favors a viewpoint, after discussion the group consensus is likely a stronger endorsement of the viewpoint. Conversely, if the group was initially opposed to a viewpoint, group discussion would likely lead to stronger opposition. Group polarization explains many actions taken by groups that would not be undertaken by individuals. Group polarization can be observed at political conventions, when platforms of the party are supported by individuals who, when not in a group, would decline to support them. A more everyday example

is a group's discussion of how attractive someone is. Does your opinion change if you find someone attractive, but your friends do not agree? If your friends vociferously agree, might you then find this person even more attractive?



TERM TO KNOW

Group Polarization

The strengthening of an original group attitude after the discussion of views within a group.

5. Social Facilitation

Not all intergroup interactions lead to the negative outcomes we have described. Sometimes being in a group situation can improve performance. **Social facilitation** occurs when an individual performs better when an audience is watching than when the individual performs the behavior alone. This typically occurs when people are performing a task for which they are skilled. Can you think of an example in which having an audience could improve performance? One common example is sports. Skilled basketball players will be more likely to make a free throw basket when surrounded by a cheering audience than when playing alone in the gym. However, there are instances when even skilled athletes can have difficulty under pressure. For example, if an athlete is less skilled or nervous about making a free throw, having an audience may actually hinder rather than help. In sum, social facilitation is likely to occur for easy tasks, or tasks at which we are skilled, but worse performance may occur when performing in front of others, depending on the task.

Another way in which a group presence can affect our performance is social loafing. **Social loafing** is the exertion of less effort by a person working together with a group. Social loafing occurs when our individual performance cannot be evaluated separately from the group. Thus, group performance declines on easy tasks. Essentially individual group members loaf and let other group members pick up the slack. Because each individual's efforts cannot be evaluated, individuals become less motivated to perform well. For example, consider a group of people cooperating to clean litter from the roadside. Some people will exert a great amount of effort, while others will exert little effort. Yet the entire job gets done, and it may not be obvious who worked hard and who didn't.

As a college student, you may have experienced social loafing while working on a group project. Have you ever had to contribute more than your fair share because your fellow group members weren't putting in the work? This may happen when a professor assigns a group grade instead of individual grades. If the professor doesn't know how much effort each student contributed to a project, some students may be inclined to let more conscientious students do more of the work. The chance of social loafing in student work groups increases as the size of the group increases.

Interestingly, the opposite of social loafing occurs when the task is complex and difficult. Remember the previous discussion of choking under pressure? This happens when you perform a difficult task and your individual performance can be evaluated. In a group setting, such as the student work group, if your individual performance cannot be evaluated, there is less pressure for you to do well, and thus less anxiety or physiological arousal. This puts you in a relaxed state in which you can perform your best, if you choose. If the task is a difficult one, many people feel motivated and believe that their group needs their input to do well on a challenging project.

Given what you learned about social loafing, what advice would you give a new professor about how to design group projects? If you suggested that individuals' efforts should not be evaluated, to prevent the anxiety of choking under pressure, but that the task must be challenging, you have a good understanding of

the concepts discussed in this section. Alternatively, you can suggest that individuals' efforts should be evaluated, but the task should be easy so as to facilitate performance. Good luck trying to convince your professor to only assign easy projects!



TERMS TO KNOW

Social Facilitation

An individual performs better when an audience is watching than when the individual performs the behavior alone.

Social Loafing

The exertion of less effort by a person working together with a group.



SUMMARY

People sometimes go along with groups they belong to, or conform, based on power dynamics in the group. People typically follow these group norms either to fit in and be liked, or perhaps to gain information from the group.

Authority figures also have influence over our behaviors, and many people become obedient and follow orders even if the orders are contrary to their personal values. **Conformity** to group pressures can also result in **groupthink**, or the faulty decision-making process that results from cohesive group members trying to maintain group harmony.

Group situations can improve human behavior through **facilitating** performance on easy tasks, but inhibiting performance on difficult tasks. The presence of others can also lead to social loafing when individual efforts cannot be evaluated.

Good luck with your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Confederate

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The modification of the opinions of members of a group to align with what they believe is the group consensus.

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