

= Solomon Asch =

Solomon Eliot Asch (September 14 , 1907 ? February 20 , 1996) was a Polish gestalt psychologist and pioneer in social psychology in the United States . He created seminal pieces of work in impression formation , prestige suggestion , conformity , and many other topics in social psychology . His work follows a common theme of Gestalt psychology that the whole is not only greater than the sum of its parts , but the nature of the whole fundamentally alters the parts . Asch stated : " Most social acts have to be understood in their setting , and lose meaning if isolated . No error in thinking about social facts is more serious than the failure to see their place and function " (Asch , 1952 , p . 61) . He is most well known for his conformity experiments , in which he demonstrated the influence of group pressure on opinions . A Review of General Psychology survey , published in 2002 , ranked Asch as the 41st most cited psychologist of the 20th century .

= = Early life = =

Asch was born in Warsaw , Poland on September 14 , 1907 to a Jewish family . He grew up in a small town , Żowicz , Poland .

In 1920 Asch emigrated at the age of 13 with his family to the United States . They lived on the Lower East Side of New York , a dense area of many Jewish , Italian and Irish immigrants . His friends called him Shlaym .

= = Education = =

Asch was shy when he moved to the United States and did not speak English fluently . He went to the neighborhood public school , P.S. 147 , to attend 6th grade . As a result of the language barrier , Asch had a very difficult time understanding in class . He learned English by reading Charles Dickens . Asch later attended Townsend Harris High School , a very selective high school attached to the City College of New York . After high school , he attended the City College of New York , majoring in both literature and science . He became interested in psychology towards the end of his undergraduate career after reading the work of William James and a few philosophers . In 1928 , when he was 21 years old , he received his Bachelor of Science .

Asch went on to pursue his graduate degree at Columbia University . He initially was not very interested in social psychology , but he was interested in anthropology . With the help of Gardner Murphy , Lois Murphy , Franz Boas , and Ruth Benedict to gain a summer fellowship , he investigated how children became members of their culture . His master 's thesis was a statistical analysis of the test scores of 200 children under the supervision of Woodworth . Asch received his master 's degree in 1930 . His doctoral dissertation examined whether all learning curves have the same form ; H.E. Garrett assigned the topic to him . He received his PhD in 1932 .

Asch was exposed to Gestalt psychology through Gardner Murphy , then a young faculty member at Columbia . He became much more interested in Gestalt psychology after meeting and working closely with his adviser at Columbia Max Wertheimer , one of the founders of Gestalt psychology . He later became close friends with Wertheimer .

= = Family life = =

Asch met Florence Miller in a library on East Broadway on the lower East Side in New York City . He married her in 1930 . Their relationship was reported as being " easy , good @-@ humored " (Rock , pg . 5) . Asch remained married to Florence his entire life . They had their first and only son , Peter , in 1937 . Peter Asch became a Professor of Economics at Rutgers University , married Ruth Zindler and had two sons , Eric and David . Peter died of heart failure at age 52 (predeceasing both parents and his wife .)

= = Career = =

Asch began his teaching career at Brooklyn College . In 1947 , he moved to Swarthmore College , where he stayed for 19 years (1947 @-@ 1966) . Swarthmore was the major center for scholars of Gestalt psychology at that time in the United States . Wolfgang Kohler , a German immigrant ; W. C. H. Prentice , and Hans Wallach were faculty members at that time as well .

In 1966 , Asch left to found the Institute for Cognitive Studies at Rutgers University (1966 @-@ 1972) . In 1972 , Asch moved to the University of Pennsylvania . He taught there as a professor of psychology until he retired in 1979 , and was Emeritus until 1996 . Asch also had visiting posts at Harvard and MIT .

= = = Impression formation = = =

Asch was interested in how humans form impressions of other human beings . He was intrigued how we are able to easily form impressions of humans even though we have such complex structures . He specifically was interested in how impressions of other people were established and if there were any principles that regulated these impressions . Asch concluded " to know a person is to have a grasp of a particular structure " . He demonstrated through his experiments that forming an impression has the following elements :

- 1) it is an organized process ,
- 2) the characteristics are perceived differently in relation to other characteristics ,
- 3) central qualities are discovered , causing a distinction between them and peripheral qualities ,
- 4) relations of harmony and contradiction are observed .

Asch conducted many experiments in which he asked participants to form an impression of a hypothetical person based on several characteristics said to belong to them .

Central characteristics on impression formation In one experiment , two groups , A and B , were exposed to a list of exactly the same characteristics except one , cold vs. warm . The list of characteristics given to each group are listed below :

Group A : intelligent @-@ skillful @-@ industrious @-@ warm @-@ determined @-@ practical @-@ cautious

Group B : intelligent @-@ skillful @-@ industrious @-@ cold @-@ determined @-@ practical @-@ cautious

One group of people were told that the person was warm and another group of people were told the person is " cold " . Participants were asked to write a brief description of the impression they formed after hearing these characteristics . The experimenters also produced a check list consisting of pairs of opposite traits , such as generous / ungenerous , shrewd / wise , etc . These words were related to the first list of characteristics they heard . Participants were asked to indicate which of these traits matched with the hypothetical person who had just been described to them .

Asch found that very different impressions were found based on this one characteristic in the list . In general , the " A " impressions were far more positive than the " B " impressions . Based on the results of the written descriptions of the hypothetical person , the meaning of the other characteristics in the list seemed to change , related to whether the hypothetical person was described as a " warm " or " cold " person .

Not all qualities were changed by this word . Words such as " honest " , " strong " , " serious " , and " reliable " were not affected . The words " warm " and " cold " were shown to be of more importance in forming participant 's impressions than other characteristics . They were considered to be basic to understanding the person , whereas other characteristics would be considered secondary . Thus , if another characteristic in this list was changed between two subjects , such as manipulating the words " polite " and " blunt " , instead of the words " warm " and " cold " , it would not affect the impression of the person as much as did " warm " and " cold " . Asch called " warm " and " cold " " central " characteristics , and " polite " and " blunt " peripheral characteristics .

Order effects on impression formation

In another experiment , Asch found that the order in which he presented the traits of a hypothetical person drastically influenced the impression formed by participants formed . For example ,

participants were read one of the following lists below :

A. intelligent @-@ industrious @-@ impulsive @-@ critical @-@ stubborn @-@ envious

B. envious @-@ stubborn @-@ critical @-@ impulsive @-@ industrious @-@ intelligent

Series A starts with desirable qualities and ends with undesirable qualities , while the reverse is true for Series B. As a result of this slight difference , people perceive person A as someone who is an " able person who possesses certain shortcomings which , do not , however , overshadow his merits " . But , people perceive person B as a " problem , whose abilities are hampered by his serious difficulties " . The meaning of the other words in this list also change in the majority of subjects between list A and list B. Words such as " impulsive " and " critical " take on a positive meaning with A , but a negative meaning with B.

Similarity and difference of impression

In another central experiment , Asch presented participants with four groups of characteristics . Each participant was exposed to the group of words listed below .

Set 1 : Quick , Skillful , Helpful

Set 2 : Quick , Clumsy , Helpful

Set 3 : Slow , Skillful , Helpful

Set 4 : Slow , Clumsy , Helpful

Notice that only one characteristic , " helpful " , is the same throughout all of the four sets . Participants were asked 1) which of the other three sets most resemble Set 1 , and 2) which of the other sets most resembles Set 2 . In 87 percent of the cases , Set 1 was seen most similar with Set 3 . In only 13 percent of the cases , people reported Set 1 to be similar to Set 2 . Also , Set 2 was said to resemble Set 4 in 85 percent of the cases and only 9 percent of the cases was it said to resemble Set 1 was the closest .

However , there are more " identical elements " in Set 1 and 2 and in Set 3 and 4 . Notice that two of the three words are the same in Set 1 and 2 and in Set 3 and 4 . The similarity in sets can not be based on the number of shared elements in the set . Participants also reported that the word " quick " of set 1 was most similar in meaning to " slow " of set 3 . Similarly , " quick " of set 2 was perceived to be most similar in meaning to " slow " of set 4 .

Asch reached the following conclusions based on this experiment :

1) The meaning of a characteristic changes based on a change in the " environment " it 's in . Thus , the meanings of the words " quick " and " slow " change based on what other words it is presented with or associated with in real life . The meaning of the word " quick " in set 1 is associated more with " one of assurance , of smoothness of movement " while in set 2 the word is associated with " forced quickness , in an effort to be helpful " . In everyday life , we perceive a quick , skillful person to be very different from a quick , clumsy person . However , we perceive someone who is " quick and skillful " and " slow and skillful " as being similar and sharing the same quality of being more of an expert .

2) The change in the meaning of the characteristic is determined by its relationship with other characteristics . " [Set] 1 is quick because he is skillful ; [Set] 2 is clumsy because he is fast " " In [Set] 3 slowness indicates care , prides in work well @-@ done . Slowness in [Set] 4 indicates sluggishness , poor motor coordinate , some physical retardation " We perceive our overall impression by integrating the relationships of the different qualities of a person . Therefore , we form very different impressions when one of these qualities differ .

3) " Dynamic consequences are grasped in the interaction of qualities " , (Asch , pg . 280) . Participants considered " quick " and " skillful " and " slow " and " skillful " as characteristics that cooperate together , but they think of " quick " and " clumsy " as characteristics that cancel one another .

= = = Prestige suggestion = = =

As a result of World War II in the 1940s , Asch and other social psychologists were interested in propaganda . They wondered : How do you get people to believe what you want them to believe ? How do you get people to believe they should sacrifice for the war effort ?

In everyday life , psychologists noticed that people are persuaded by messages differently based on the identity of the author . It seemed that the more prestige the author / speaker has , the more likely the person will believe them . Many social psychologists prior to Asch had studied this phenomenon . However , Asch disagreed with many of them and critiqued their interpretations . His main conclusion was that a change in evaluation requires a change in the content and meaning of the response as a result of the change in context . Therefore , the meaning of the message is interpreted differently depending on who is the author of the message . He suggests that participants are not blindly accepting a message based on the author , but rather they are making meaning of the quote based on the author .

Asch called into question the present theory for the underlying psychological process concerning the effect of group forces on the formation and change of opinions and attitudes . Asch critiques the experimental approach of many different psychologists , including Zillig , Moore , Marple , Sherif , Thorndike , and Lorge , in their investigations of evaluation change . Lorge 's and Sherif 's investigation of the effects of " prestige " on the evaluation of statements were investigated in detail in one of Asch 's articles .

The same basic procedure was used by all of the above @-@ mentioned psychologists . A participant makes a judgment about some particular issue . At a later time , they judge the same problem again but with information of how certain groups or prestigious people have evaluated the same problem . If the subject changes his judgment in the same direction as the evaluations of these groups of people or prestigious people , then this is considered a degree of influence that they have exerted on the participant 's judgment .

Lorge critique

Lorge 's main finding was that " prestige " can alter evaluations of statements of serious political and economic questions .

In his experiment , subjects rated a set of 50 quotations on a 5 @-@ point scale of " agreement " or " disagreement " with the statement . The quotes were followed by the names of two public people . Subjects were informed that one of the names was the author of the true source and were asked to select the true author . After about a month , the subjects again rated the same quotation but with the true author only listed below the quotation . Subjects also rated earlier their " respect for the political opinions of each of these individuals " . This was used as a measure of prestige . Lorge found that the participants rated the same statement differently when it was referred to a different author . More specifically , the rating of a statement tended to rise when it was referred to a more " prestigious " author .

One of Lorge 's main conclusions is that " an unchanged object of judgment undergoes a change of evaluation " . Therefore , the prestige of the author is viewed as acting arbitrarily on the statement regardless of the content or merit of the statement . Participants simply view the statement as having higher value when the author has higher prestige .

Asch , however , reinterprets Lorge 's findings and suggests that there was " a change in the object of judgment , rather than in the judgment of the object " (Asch , 1940) . He suggests that a person will redefine the object of judgment based on the content of the evaluations . Therefore , the person will base the meaning of the quote in the context of what he / she believes to be true about the person who said the quote , resulting in different meanings of the statements based on the author .

In evidence of his claims , Asch conducted an experiment in which college students read statements with the name of one author below each statement . They were instructed to describe what the statement meant to them . Two groups of students read the same statements but with different authors associated with them . The main finding was that there was a " cognitive reorganization " of the statement based on what was understood about the author of the statement . Participant 's felt the meaning of the quote differed depending on who wrote the statement .

For example , the following quote was presented to both groups of subjects : " Only the willfully blind can fail to see that the old style capitalism of a primitive freebooting period is gone forever . The capitalism of complete laissez @-@ faire , which thrived on low wages and maximum profits for minimum turnover , which rejected collective bargaining and fought against justified public regulation of the competitive process , is a thing of the past . " When participants thought that Bridges (a well

@-@ known union leader) was the author , they interpreted the passage to be an " expression of the accomplishments of labor in the face of opposition from capital and contained a resolve to defend these gains from attack " . However , when Johnston (president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce at the time) was the author , they interpreted the passage to be " a perspective of policy in the interest of business , especially of ' enlightened ' business " . Asch conducted a very similar and classic study with participants reading statements either attributed to Jefferson or Lenin .

One of the major points that Asch makes is that participants are not completely blind in the experiment and making arbitrary choices based on this bias . Asch claims that participants were acting reasonable in their change of evaluation of the judgment because the context of the judgment and thus the meaning of the judgment had changed . Lorge , however , suggested that if the participants were behaving logical , their evaluations should have remained the same despite the change in author .

Sherif critique

Muzafer Sherif conducted an experiment , very similar to Lorge , in which he investigated how prestige affects the evaluation of literary materials . College students were asked to rank a set of prose passages according to their literary quality . Each passage also included the name of a well @-@ known author . However , all of the passages were actually written by the same author . Participants rated the authors earlier in terms of their literary standing . Sherif found that passages that were identified with highly acclaimed authors received higher rankings .

Asch suggested that Sherif 's results could be largely influenced from the environment of a laboratory experiment . Because the experiment was designed to have each of the passages have very few differences between them , participants were faced with a dilemma when asked to distinguish between them . The experimenter and other neighboring participants may appear to find the task obvious , so the participant attends to any clues that might help him make the decision . In fear of looking ridiculous , the participant might now approach the task as , " Which of these am I expected to like and dislike ? " With the only information that varies being the author , the participant might make conclusions about the quotes based on this one piece of information that varies .

= = = Conformity experiments = = =

Asch is most well known for his conformity experiments . His main finding was that group pressure can change opinion , of even obvious facts .

Asch wanted to examine throughout his experiments to 1) What extent do social forces alter people 's opinions ? and also 2) Which aspect of the group influence is most important @-@ the size of the majority or the unanimity ?

Asch 's conformity experiment was conducted using 123 male participants who were told that they would be part of an experiment in visual judgment . Each participant was put into a group with 5 to 7 confederates (people who knew the true aims of the experiment , but were introduced as participants to the naive " real " participant) . The participants were shown a card with a line on it , followed by another card with 3 lines on it labeled a , b , and c . The participants were then asked to say which line matched the line on the first card in length . Each line question was called a " trial " . The " real " participant answered last or penultimately . 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 . However , after the fourth trial , all of the confederates respond with the clearly wrong answer at certain points such that in 12 of the 18 trials they all said the wrong answer . The 12 trials in which the confederates answered incorrectly were considered the " critical trials " . The participant could thus either ignore the majority and go with his own senses or he could go along with the majority and ignore the clearly obvious fact . The aim was to see whether the real participant would change his answer and respond the same way as the confederates or stick with the clearly obvious answer .

Asch found that a considerable percentage followed the majority . Asch suggested that this procedure created a doubt in the participants ' mind about the seemingly obvious answer . Participants reported that the correct but rejected line was almost but not quite equal to the standard

line . Asch also found that the effectiveness of the group pressure increased significantly from 1 person to 3 people unanimously responding incorrectly . However , there was not much increase after that . He also found that when the participant had a confederate pose as a supporting partner who also responded correctly , the power of the majority to influence the participant decreased substantially .

Asch told his colleagues that his idea to study conformity was brought about by his childhood experiences in Poland . He recalls being seven years old and staying up for his first Passover night . He recalls seeing his grandmother pour an extra glass of wine . When he asked who the glass of wine was for , she said that it was for the prophet Elijah . He then asked her whether he would really take a sip from the glass and his uncle assured him that he would . His uncle told him to watch very closely when the time came . " Filled with a sense of suggestion and expectation " Asch " thought he saw the level of wine in the cup drop just a bit " . Thus , early in life , Asch succumbed to conformity , which fostered his idea to investigate conformity later in life .

= = = Other work = = =

Metaphors

Asch looked at metaphors in a variety of different languages , such as Old Testament Hebrew , Homeric Greek , Chinese , Thai , Malayam , and Hausa . He found that there was a similar meaning for the sensory term , such as " cold " in English , and the corresponding personality trait . He concluded that metaphors , and thus language , reflects a person 's attempt to understand the true properties of a person or object .

Unitary and nonunitary associations

Asch showed that simple properties would enter into associations much easier when they are part of the same unit than when they are from different units .

= = Notable influences = =

Asch was Stanley Milgram 's advisor at Princeton University , and Milgram completed his dissertation on national differences under conformity under Asch . Asch also largely influenced the theory of many other social psychologists , such as Harold Kelley .

= = Legacy = =

According to Levine (1999) , Asch 's research has led to four critical ideas that persist in social influence research . First , Asch believed that social interaction reflects the ability of individual people to synthesize information about group norms , the viewpoints of others and their own perceptions of themselves as group members . This point of view has been manifested in at least two important theories (social identity theory and self @-@ categorization theory) , and has been a source of inspiration for the work of many social psychologists (See Hardin & Higgins , 1996 ; Weick & Roberts , 1993) .

Second , Asch emphasized that independent thought and disagreement among group members is a cornerstone of group functioning . He believed that only by settling our differences with other group members can we actually understand the shortcomings of our own beliefs (Levine , 1999) . This notion has been embraced by social scientists like Moscovici , who has pursued this rationale as the basis for his theory of minority influence in group situations , and has also been incorporated into sociocognitive conflict theory .

Asch also believed the relationship between conformity and non @-@ conformity was not as simple as one being the opposite of the other . This was Asch 's third influential idea , and he suggested that conformity and resistance might be explained by their own unique social psychological processes . Conformity , for instance , could be a function of how aware a person is that they are being influenced by the group (distortion of perception) , the degree to which the person believes that the group consensus is correct (distortion of judgement) , and how badly the person wants to

be accepted by the group (distortion of action) . Although these exact terms have not been directly ported over to the literature , researchers such as Moscovici and Nemeth have adopted the perspective that majority and minority influence are moderated by multiple processes (Levine , 1999) .

Lastly , Asch suggested that group influence can change how people perceive stimuli (See Asch , 1940 for an example) . This is the most obscure of Asch 's major ideas , in large part because it has not been cited frequently (Levine , 1999) , but is none @-@ the @-@ less important because it speaks to the power of group influence .

= = End of life = =

Asch was disappointed and concerned by the direction social psychology was going in the 1980s . He wrote , " Why do I sense , together with the current expansion , a shrinking of vision , an expansion of surface rather than depth , a failure of imagination ? Why is not social psychology more exciting , more human in the most usual sense of that term ? To sum up , is this discipline perhaps on the wrong track ? " (Asch , p. x) Asch was worried that social psychologists were not asking the deeper questions that would help change and improve the world . Asch died at the age of 88 on February 21 , 1996 in his home in Haverford , Pennsylvania .

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