

SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Social Influence: AQA A-Level Psychology

This presentation explores the fascinating world of social influence in psychology, covering key topics from the AQA A-Level specification including conformity, obedience, resistance to influence, minority influence, and social change. Each section includes exam-style questions to help with revision.



by Stephen Renwick

Types of Conformity

Conformity is changing one's behaviour due to the real or imagined influence of others. There are three distinct types:

Internalisation

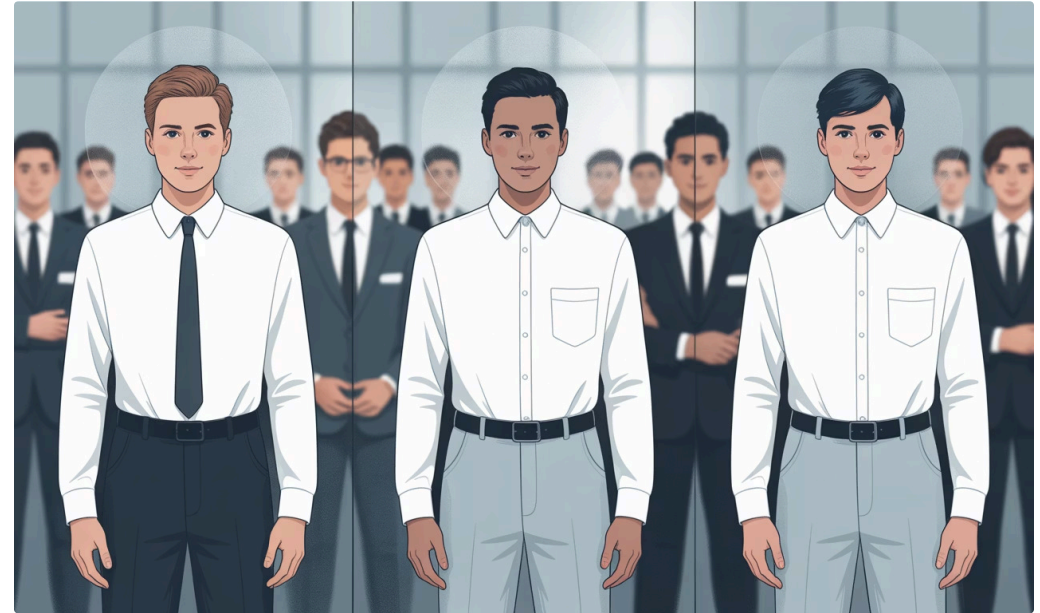
When an individual genuinely accepts and believes in the group's values and attitudes, adopting them as their own. This represents the deepest level of conformity and typically results in permanent change.

Identification

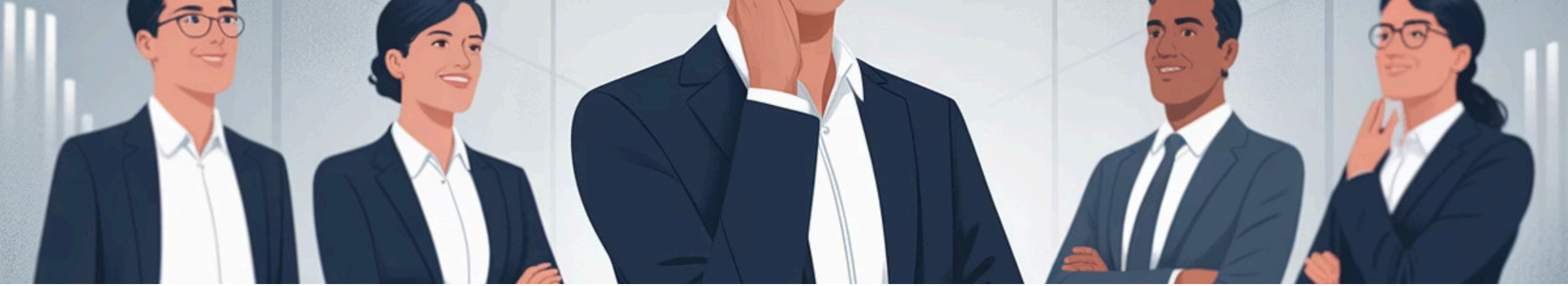
When an individual adopts the behaviours and beliefs of a person or group they admire or wish to be associated with. This conformity lasts only as long as the relationship remains important.

Compliance

When an individual outwardly conforms to group expectations while privately disagreeing. This is the most superficial type of conformity and typically disappears when group pressure is removed.



Exam Question: Explain the difference between internalisation and compliance as types of conformity. [4 marks]



Explanations for Conformity

Informational Social Influence

We conform because we believe others have accurate information.

This occurs when:

- We are uncertain about the correct behaviour
- We look to others for guidance
- We accept their position as being correct

This typically leads to internalisation as we genuinely believe the information is right.

Normative Social Influence

We conform to be accepted and avoid rejection. This occurs when:

- We want to fit in with a group
- We fear ridicule or exclusion
- We value group membership

This typically leads to compliance as we may not privately agree with the group.

Exam Question: Outline two explanations for why people conform to majority influence. [6 marks]

Asch's Conformity Experiments

Solomon Asch (1951) conducted a series of experiments investigating conformity to majority influence. Participants were asked to match a line to one of three comparison lines, with the correct answer being obvious. However, confederates unanimously gave incorrect answers before the real participant responded.

Key findings:

- About 32% of participants conformed across all critical trials
- 75% conformed at least once
- 25% never conformed

Variables affecting conformity:

- **Group size:** Conformity increases with group size up to 3-4 people, then plateaus
- **Unanimity:** Even one dissenter dramatically reduces conformity
- **Task difficulty:** More ambiguous tasks lead to increased conformity



Exam Question: Describe and evaluate Asch's research into conformity. [16 marks]

Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment



The Experiment

Philip Zimbardo (1973) investigated how readily people would conform to social roles by simulating a prison environment. 24 male students were randomly assigned as 'prisoners' or 'guards' in a mock prison at Stanford University.



Key Findings

Guards quickly embraced authoritarian roles, becoming increasingly cruel and abusive. Prisoners showed signs of extreme stress, with some having emotional breakdowns. The experiment was terminated after just 6 days instead of the planned 14 due to the psychological harm being caused.



Implications

The study demonstrates how powerful social roles can be in determining behaviour. People rapidly conformed to their assigned roles despite knowing it was just an experiment, suggesting situational factors can override personal values and traits.

Exam Question: Outline Zimbardo's study of conformity to social roles and discuss two ethical issues raised by this research. [12 marks]

Explanations for Obedience

Agentic State

Milgram proposed that people enter an 'agentic state' when following orders from an authority figure. In this state:

- They see themselves as an agent of authority rather than autonomous
- They transfer responsibility to the authority figure
- They feel absolved of personal accountability for their actions

Legitimacy of Authority

People are more likely to obey those they perceive as having legitimate authority. This legitimacy may come from:

- Social position or status (e.g., doctor, teacher)
- Expertise or specialist knowledge
- Contextual cues (e.g., uniform, setting)



Exam Question: "The agentic state explanation is sufficient to explain why people obey." Discuss this statement. [16 marks]

Milgram's Obedience Studies

The Original Study (1963)

Participants were instructed to administer increasingly severe electric shocks to a 'learner' (actually an actor) when they gave incorrect answers. Despite hearing cries of pain, 65% of participants continued to the maximum 450-volt shock when prompted by the experimenter.

Situational Variables

Milgram conducted variations to investigate factors affecting obedience:

- **Proximity:** Obedience decreased when the learner was in the same room (40%) or when physical contact was required (30%)
- **Location:** Obedience dropped to 47.5% when the experiment moved from prestigious Yale University to a run-down office building
- **Uniform:** Authority figures in uniform commanded greater obedience than those in civilian clothes

Ethical Implications

The studies raised serious ethical concerns about deception, psychological harm, and the right to withdraw. However, they provided valuable insights into destructive obedience that might not have been possible through other means.

Exam Question: Describe and evaluate Milgram's research into obedience to authority. [16 marks]

The Authoritarian Personality

While situational factors clearly influence obedience, Adorno et al. (1950) proposed a dispositional explanation: the Authoritarian Personality. This personality type develops from harsh, strict parenting and is characterised by:

- Rigid adherence to conventional values
- Uncritical submission to authority figures
- Aggression toward those who violate conventional norms
- Opposition to imagination, creativity, and tenderness
- Belief in power and toughness
- Tendency to stereotype and think in rigid categories

Adorno developed the F-scale (Fascism scale) to measure authoritarian tendencies. Those scoring high on this scale are more likely to obey authority without question and potentially engage in prejudicial behaviour.



Exam Question: Outline the authoritarian personality as an explanation for obedience. [4 marks]

Exam Question: Evaluate the authoritarian personality as an explanation for obedience. [8 marks]

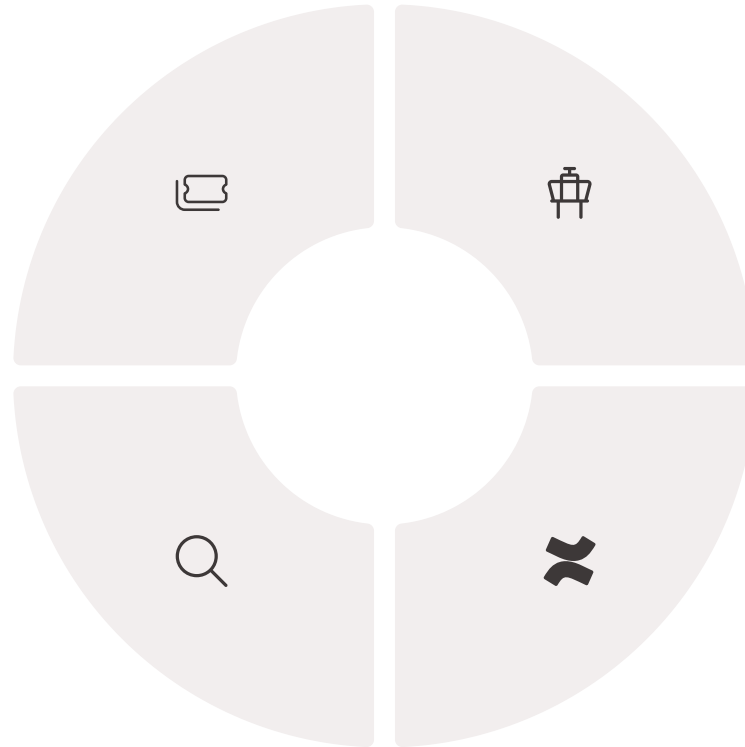
Resistance to Social Influence

Social Support

Having allies who share your viewpoint makes it easier to resist majority influence. Even one other dissenter can significantly reduce conformity, as shown in Asch's variations where conformity dropped from 32% to 5% with just one supporting confederate.

Independence

Some cultures value individualism over collectivism, making resistance to group pressure more socially acceptable. Individual differences in independence also play a role in resistance.



Locus of Control

People with an internal locus of control believe they control their own destiny and are more likely to resist social pressure. Those with an external locus believe their lives are controlled by outside forces and are more likely to conform or obey.

Self-Efficacy

Individuals with high self-efficacy (belief in one's ability to succeed) are more confident in their judgments and less likely to conform. This relates to both expertise and general self-confidence.

Exam Question: Discuss two factors that help people resist social influence. [8 marks]

Minority Influence

While majority influence often leads to public compliance, minorities can sometimes influence the majority to adopt their position through a process of conversion. For a minority to be influential, they need:

Consistency

The minority must maintain a consistent position over time and between members. This demonstrates conviction and forces the majority to take the minority view seriously.

Commitment

The minority must show they are willing to suffer for their beliefs, demonstrating the strength of their conviction and potentially triggering respect from the majority.

Flexibility

While maintaining core principles, some flexibility in approach can make the minority seem more reasonable and less extreme, increasing their persuasiveness.



Moscovici's blue-green study (1969) demonstrated minority influence. Confederates consistently calling blue slides green led 32% of participants to agree at least once, showing how a consistent minority can influence majority perceptions.

Exam Question: Explain how consistency, commitment and flexibility contribute to successful minority influence. [9 marks]

Social Cryptoamnesia

Social cryptoamnesia refers to the process by which minority influence leads to social change over time, with people forgetting the original source of the ideas. This process involves several stages:

1. A minority presents a consistent alternative viewpoint
2. This creates cognitive conflict in the majority
3. The majority reconsiders their position through a validation process
4. Gradual private acceptance of minority views occurs
5. Over time, the origin of these now-mainstream ideas is forgotten

This explains how once-radical ideas (e.g., women's suffrage, environmental protection, LGBTQ+ rights) eventually become mainstream societal values, with many forgetting they were once minority positions that faced significant resistance.



Exam Question: Explain what is meant by social cryptoamnesia and how it contributes to social change. [6 marks]

Social Influence in Social Change

Minority Starts Movement

A small group identifies an issue and begins advocating for change, often facing ridicule or hostility. They maintain consistency in their message and demonstrate commitment through sacrifice.

1

Snowball Effect

As numbers grow, the movement gains legitimacy. Those with internal locus of control are often early adopters. The movement may gain celebrity endorsements or media coverage, increasing visibility.

3

2

Growing Support

As the minority persists, they gain some supporters. Social support makes it easier for others to resist majority pressure and join the movement. The minority becomes more organised and visible.

4

Social Change

Eventually, the movement reaches a tipping point where their position becomes mainstream. Laws may change, and social norms shift. The original minority influence is often forgotten (social cryptoamnesia).

Exam Question: Discuss how minority influence processes contribute to social change. Use examples in your answer. [16 marks]

Case Study: Environmental Movement

The environmental movement provides an excellent example of how social influence processes contribute to social change:

- **1960s-70s:** Small groups of environmental activists were viewed as radical minorities. They showed consistency in message and commitment through protests and lifestyle changes.
- **1980s-90s:** Growing scientific evidence provided informational social influence. Early adopters with internal locus of control joined the movement, providing social support for others.
- **2000s-present:** Environmental concerns became mainstream, with majority influence now promoting "green" behaviours. Many people now conform to environmental norms through identification or internalisation.

This case demonstrates how a minority position can eventually become the majority view through persistent influence, eventually creating new social norms that people conform to.



Exam Question: With reference to a real-world example, explain how minority influence can lead to social change over time. [8 marks]

Exam Technique: Applying Social Influence

16-Mark Essays

For 16-mark questions, aim to:

- Define key terms in your introduction
- Describe relevant studies/theories in detail (AO1)
- Evaluate with methodological issues, alternative explanations, and real-world applications (AO3)
- Include a brief conclusion summarising your evaluation

Approximately 6 marks for AO1 (description) and 10 marks for AO3 (evaluation)

Application Questions

For application questions:

- Identify the relevant theories/studies
- Explicitly link psychological concepts to the scenario
- Use psychological terminology accurately
- Consider multiple factors where appropriate

Remember to elaborate on how/why the concept applies, not just state that it does

Practice Question: "Social influence research has limited relevance to real-world behaviour." Discuss this statement. [16 marks]



Key Takeaways: Social Influence

Conformity

People conform through internalisation, identification, or compliance due to informational or normative influence. Variables like group size, unanimity, and task difficulty affect conformity rates, as shown in Asch's studies. Zimbardo demonstrated how readily people conform to social roles.

Resistance

Social support and internal locus of control help people resist social influence, allowing for independence from group pressure.

Obedience

Milgram showed how situational factors like proximity, location, and uniform affect obedience. Explanations include the agentic state, legitimacy of authority, and the authoritarian personality.

Minority Influence & Social Change

Minorities influence majorities through consistency, commitment, and flexibility, contributing to social change through processes like social cryptoamnesia.

Final Exam Question: Outline and evaluate two explanations of why people conform to social influence. [16 marks]