

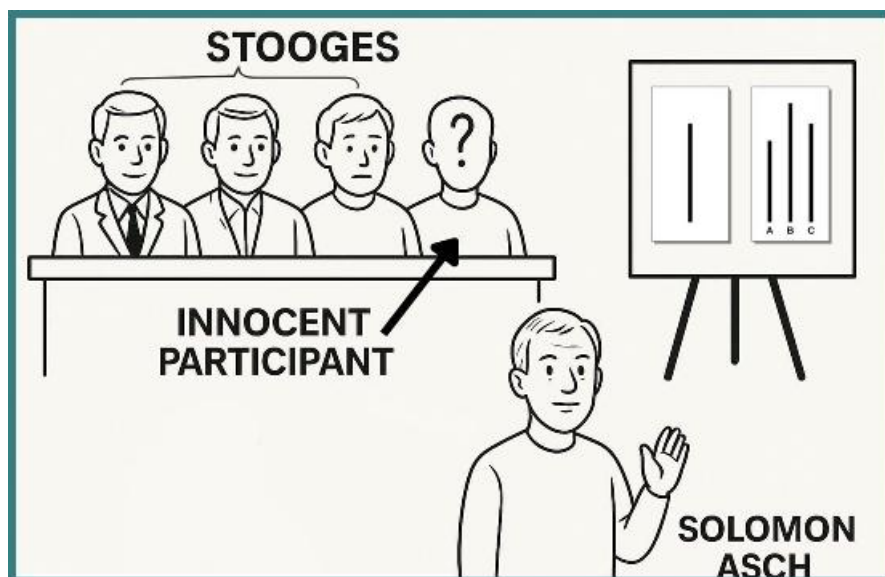
Variables Affecting Conformity;

Group Size, Unanimity and Task Difficulty as Investigated by Asch

The Original Study (Asch, 1951)

Asch designed an experiment to test conformity in a situation where the correct answer was obvious. He recruited 123 male students from Swarthmore College in the USA to participate in a 'vision test.' They were divided into groups of 5 to 7 people in which, unknown to the participants, all but one of them were confederates of Asch and followed his instructions. In other words, each group consisted of 4 to 6 confederates and 1 naïve/ real participant.

Each group was shown a set of 3 lines and a separate reference line (known as the 'line comparison test'), and group members had the task of simply stating which line was the same length as the reference line. Each set of lines consisted of one line that was obviously the same length as the reference line, and two that were obviously different. Group members gave their answer one after the other, and the real participant gave his answer in next to last place. Each group performed the task 18 times (18 trials). On the first 2 trials the confederates answered correctly, but for 12 of the remaining 16 trials they answered incorrectly. These 12 trials were the 'critical trials' in the experiment.



The results of Asch's experiment were astonishing considering that the stimuli used consisted of unambiguous lines in which participants must have known the correct answer. Participants conformed to the obviously incorrect answer given by the group majority on 32% of critical trials. 74% of participants conformed to the incorrect group majority at least once. Only 25% of participants did not conform at all. This demonstrates normative social influence to a majority.

Variations on Asch experiment:

Asch further investigated several factors that he believed influenced conformity by varying these factors in his experiment:

Group Size

When the group size was reduced to just two (one confederate) there was almost zero conformity. A majority of two confederates yielded a small degree of conformity, and groups with three or more confederates produced the highest rates of conformity. This shows that groups with a majority of three or more people are sufficient to cause conformity even when the correct answer is obvious.

Unanimity

Asch instructed one of the confederates (usually the 3rd or 4th to answer) to go against the majority and give the correct answer. In this situation conformity rates dropped, and the real participant was less likely to conform to the obviously incorrect answer. The presence of another group member going against the majority opinion (a dissenter) lends social support, and other group members are less likely to feel alone and are more likely to stick to their own opinion. This shows that majority influence changes if people believe they have an ally to go along with.

Task Difficulty

When the task was made more difficult (by making all three lines more similar to the reference line), conformity rates increased. This shows that when a task is more difficult, individuals are more likely to refer to the majority opinion and so conformity is more likely. This demonstrates informational social influence.

