

Appendix I

Conformity

After WWII, several social science researchers felt they needed to explore how Adolf Hitler could have persuaded everyday people to participate in stigmatizing and rounding up millions of people who would subsequently be put to death in prison camps.

In many ways, **Soloman Asch** was the father of conformity research. He showed how a single individual can be influenced by the group in his 'longest line' experiments (Asch 1956). These comprised a number of his students who knew what was going on and one lone participant who did not. The lone participant was shown several lines in which one was distinctly longer than the others and asked to indicate the longest line. If the students who were *in* on it all chose a line that was not the longest, then in 40% of cases, so would the participant! Without the influence of others, participants had no difficulty identifying the longest line.

Stanley Milgram was a social psychologist, born in New York to Romanian and Hungarian parents. A few months after the beginning of the trial of Nazi war criminal, Adolf Eichmann, he ran his famous obedience experiment (Asch 1963) in which two people entered a room and, after a rigged coin toss, one person (always a Confederate) became the test-taker and the other (a genuine participant) was given the role of conducting the test. The 'test-taker' was told to memorize, and then repeat back, a string of words. The test-giver was instructed to deliver an electric shock after any error made by the test taker. The participant was instructed to increase the voltage of the shock with each mistake (the Confederate was, of course, never shocked, they merely saw a light when the 'mock shock' was being delivered). At a specific point, the Confederate test-taker would mention his heart condition. The experimenter would simply tell the participant to 'please continue with the experiment.' Although it was distressing for the participant to deliver these 'shocks' (not knowing they were fake), 63% continued to shock the Confederate to the maximum (potentially lethal) level.

In around 1970, **Irving Janis** coined the phrase *Groupthink* (see Janis 1997). As background, the 'Big Red Button' (that would trigger the launch of a nuclear attack) was of considerable concern to many people during the Cold War. The notion that one individual (whether a deranged tyrant or one of the 'good guys') could put the future of the world in jeopardy, was scary enough, but the idea that such a disaster might result from the influence of a group (possibly with bad intent) made the concept even more disturbing. Subsequently, comparisons were made between the Bay of Pigs invasion, the January 28, 1986, Challenger Space Shuttle disaster, and the bombing of Pearl Harbor. All of these were cited as examples of how "groupthink" can lead to disastrous consequences as a function of individuals failing to voice their individual feelings about a choice of action in favor of following others.

In August 1971, **Dr. Philip Zimbardo** conducted an experiment, designed to be two-weeks, in a simulated 'prison', which was actually in the basement of Stanford University. The experiment was designed to examine the effects of various factors on participants' reactions and behaviors. Participants were recruited from the local community through newspaper advertisements and chosen after an assessment of their psychological stability. They were randomly assigned to being either prisoners or prison guards, the guards being given guard-like uniforms and instructed to prevent prisoners from escaping. The experiment officially started when the "prisoners" were taken by real Palo Alto police from their homes and brought to the university. (This step was sharply criticized by some because of the negative impact it could have had on the local reputation of the "prisoners" and their families). During the first five days, psychological abuse of the prisoners by the guards became increasingly brutal and after psychologist Christina Maslach visited to evaluate the conditions, she was troubled to see how participants were behaving, and she felt obliged to confront Zimbardo. He ended the experiment on the sixth day. While this study was not explicitly about conformity, since the initial instruction to the 'guards' was little more than to prevent the 'prisoners' from escaping, the increasingly brutal actions of the 'guards' were certainly, at least in part, a function of peer group pressure and conformity.