

CONFORMITY IN THE ASCH EXPERIMENT*

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Asch's study¹ is recognized as a classic experiment in social psychology, demonstrating the tendency of subjects to conform when exposed to the social pressure of a unanimous majority. Asch carried out his study during the fifties, when McCarthyism was active and alive, a period known for its unobtrusive students. Could the general social pressures generated toward conformity at that time have also affected this simple perceptual task? If so, we should expect less conformity after this last decade of student activism. The purpose of this study was to attempt to replicate the Asch experiment. In addition we included self-esteem as a predictor of conformity, since other investigators² have shown that self-esteem under certain conditions is related to persuasion.

The procedure was identical to the Asch study. Cards with straight lines were used as stimulus material. The experiment consisted of 18 trials comparing two cards. One card had one line, the other three of varying lengths. One of the three lines matched the length of the single line on the other card and the *S* was asked to identify it. On 12 of the 18 trials several confederates made a unanimous wrong choice prior to the *Ss* decision. All *Ss* also completed a measure of self-esteem consisting of a semantic differential evaluating the ideal and real self. The discrepancy between the two evaluations was considered an assessment of self-esteem.

Of the 24 participating *Ss* (all college students), 15 (62.5%) conformed on one or more trials. The number of errors varied from zero to 9, the mean being 2.38. In comparison the Asch experiment showed that 94 of 123 *Ss* (76.5%) conformed at least once; the number of errors ranging from zero to 12 for a mean of 4.41. Thus there was both a reduction in the number of *Ss* conforming, and the amount of conformity produced. The *t* test between the top and bottom half on the self-esteem measure with respect to differ-

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¹ Asch, S. E. Studies of independence and conformity: A minority against a unanimous majority. *Psychol. Monog.*, 9, 70, 1956.

² Hovland, C. I., & Janis, I. L. *Personality and Persuasibility*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959.

ences on conformity scores, was .08. All Asch's Ss were male, whereas 13 females and 11 males participated in this study. Of the female participants, 84.6% conformed one or more times, and the range of errors was zero to 9. Of the male participants, 36.4% conformed one or more times with an error range from zero to 5. The difference in conformity between sexes is significant (chi squares = 11.52, 3.92, $df = 1$, $p \leq 0.5$). Support is therefore found for a decrease in conformity since the 1950's, although female subjects conformed at levels comparable to male subjects in the Asch study. These findings suggest the need to replicate at periodic intervals experiments whose results are taken for granted. Different time periods create different pressures toward conformity, which in turn may be reflected in different levels of conformity behavior.

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