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Q. Outline and evaluate research into conformity. [20/16/12]

Asch aimed to investigate the effects of group pressure on behaviours of individuals. 123 male participants were recruited for the study and instructed to perform a task of 'visual perception.' They were seated at a table with six or eight other 'participants' and shown two cards - one with a 'standard line' and one with three 'comparison lines'. They were to answer which of the three comparison lines matched in length with the standard line. Unknown to the participants, the remaining individuals at the table were assistants of the researcher who were trained in deliberately giving the wrong answers on 12 of 18 trials. These 12 were referred to as 'critical trials'. Each individual reported their answer out aloud such that the naive participant's turn to answer would be last or second last. This created group pressure as the correct answer was obvious but the participant was exposed to several wrong answers before his turn to answer. Results indicated that on 37% of the critical trials, participants gave the wrong answer in accordance with the majority. Also, 5% participants always gave wrong answers on the critical trials, showing high levels of conformity while 25% never gave the wrong answers showing strong resistance to conformity. It could be concluded that conformity is a strong means of exerting social influence on individuals.

One strength of Asch's study was the high degree of control that was maintained. For example, participants were not informed that the study was about conformity, they were also kept blind to the fact that they were sitting with research assistants rather than actual participants. Most importantly, the task given to participants was such that the right answer was apparent, so there was no possibility that participants genuinely gave wrong answers out of not being able to figure out the right answer. This ensured that wrong answers were given only because of group pressure and not because of any confounding variable such as confusion about the right answer. This increased the credibility of conformity as a factor in social influence.

Another strength of the study was the collection and analysis of quantitative data. Frequencies of answering incorrectly on critical trials were calculated and converted to a percentage to derive the rate of conformity as being 37%. This helped in objective interpretation of the degree of conformity in participants without any researcher bias. Thus, results regarding the significant extent of conformity to group pressure have strong internal validity.

One weakness of the study was lack of mundane realism. The task given was of selecting a line matching in length to another line which was unrealistic because it was too simple and the correct answer was obvious. In real life, situations of pressure are not so straightforward - the right answer is typically obvious in such situations. For example, if a student wants to pursue an irregular career which their friends and family do not approve of, there is no clear answer to which career would be the right one to pursue. Therefore, in real life, the pressure to conform might have an even greater influence on individuals than what was seen in this study as their own confusion would add to external pressure. This reduces the generalisability of the findings of this study to the real world.



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Another weakness of Asch's research was breach of several ethical guidelines. Deception was constantly done with participants being told that the study was about 'visual perception' rather than conformity, with the truth about confederates being hidden and with the deliberate interspersing of critical trials within actual trials. Temporary emotional distress was also caused to participants by pressuring them to yield to giving the wrong answers. This indicates that ethically, participants well-being was not fully ensured in the study. However, the deception and temporary harm is justified in the face of the larger implications of the results of the study for society. The findings indicate how group pressure can prevent people from doing what is right which can be used to create awareness in society about how conformity should be abandoned when it comes to taking right decisions. Therefore, there is concern about harm caused to participants but given that it was probably not enduring as they were informed about the true purpose in debriefing, it is acceptable given the larger benefits of the study.