



Conformity

This factsheet;

- summarises the main features of conformity;
- assesses the relative merits of important studies into conformity; and
- shares some hints and exam questions.

Definition: What is conformity?

Conformity is a change in thinking or behaviour as a result of real or imagined pressure from other people. Usually there is no observable request or necessity to do so.

Explanations of conformity:

Informational social influence

Sometimes people conform because they want to be right. They think that other people might have more information regarding a situation and so conform to that view. For example, team members in a pub quiz.

Normative social influence

People may conform because they want others to like and accept them. For instance, friends may agree on which film to go and see.

Internalisation

People conform either because they want to be right and think that other people might have more information regarding a situation **or** because they want others to like and accept them. In both cases their real views gradually change over time. An example is when someone becomes a vegetarian at college to be the same as their friends but eventually adopt this for life.

Compliance

Compliance is when people conform because they want to avoid conflict. However, it does not change their real views. For instance, students following a dress code while at college.

Identification

Sometimes people conform because they want to be part of a group. To do so, and to be comfortable, they have to conform to a set of opinions that may not be their own. It does not change their real views but allows them to gain entry to an 'in-group'. For example, people tend to alter their style of dress to align with their age reference group.

Why do some people not conform?

1. Cultures that stress the importance of personal growth (individualistic cultures, such as American culture) show lower levels of conformity compared with **collectivist cultures** (such as Japanese culture).
2. Individual differences may account for some variation in conformity. For example, those with no need for social approval or high self-esteem show lower levels of conformity. These people may be called non-conformists.
3. Anti-conformists are people who appear to be non-conformist as they hold different attitudes to the majority. However, their position is in direct opposition to the majority so in some way their position still reflects the majority position.

Key studies (AO1)

Some key studies are:

Asch (1951) Conformity in an unambiguous situation.

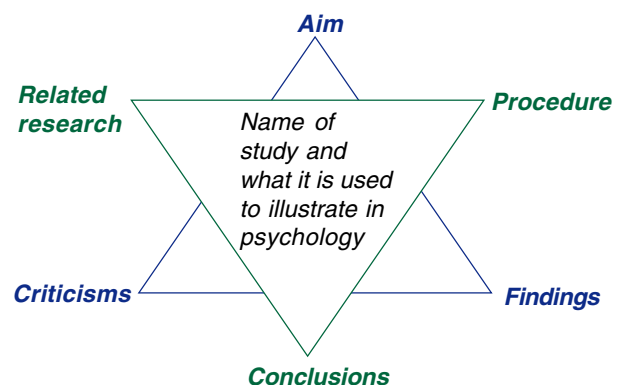
Zimbardo (1973) Stanford University prison experiment.

Sherif (1935) The autokinetic effect.

Crutchfield (1954) A technique for measuring individual differences.

Exam Hint: It is vital that you know the aims, procedures, findings, conclusions and criticisms of at least one study of majority influence. The study by Asch (1951) is a good choice. Some students find the graphic organiser (Fig. 1) useful to collect all the information together.

Fig 1: Graphic organiser



Is conformity the same as obedience? No!

1. Conformity occurs in the absence of a direct, observable command.
2. Conformity is likely to be denied rather than used as an excuse for behaviour.
3. Conformity requires no authority figure.

Conformity: Good or bad?

Most of us would cringe at the idea of being conformist because it implies we have no free will. However, conformity is what makes society ordered and possible. Thus it makes life more comfortable. Imagine the chaos of not being able to predict the behaviour of others in any given situation (e.g., in supermarket queues or school assemblies). Also, being able to follow others is sometimes a rational and efficient way of operating in a system as it saves time and effort (like copying someone else's homework!). However, there have certainly been periods in human history where conformity in society has led to fascism, oppression and even genocide. There is still a need in society for questioning and opposing some of the attitudes and behaviour of the majority, e.g., racist attitudes still persist.

Evaluating Research (AO2)

Exam Hint:

The **COSMIC** device is a useful checklist of points to consider when evaluating a study or a body of work. We have applied the device to two key studies (Table 1).

C- Context: What is the historical, social and political climate the research takes place in?

O- Of use: Can the research be used in any modern day application?

S- Supported: Can the findings be supported by other studies or questioned by other psychologists and their work?

M- Methodology: Can the way in which the researchers carried out their research be criticised or applauded?

I- Implications: If the findings are to be accepted, what does that tell us about the nature of human behaviour?

C- Cruelty: Are there ethical issues regarding this study, which are worth mentioning?

Table 1: Evaluation of key studies on conformity

Evaluation Point	Zimbardo (1973) Stanford Prison Experiment	Asch (1951) Conformity in a non-ambiguous situation
Context	Prison rioting in USA and concern about dehumanising treatment of prisoners.	Dated research. Post war America was a time of social conformity and fear of Communism.
Of Use	Findings can be related to real prison experiences- it has high ecological validity.	Given us insights into human behaviour in lots of situations, from fashion trends to cults and warfare.
Supported	The BBC Prison Experiment (2002) questions the idea that the uniforms “made them do it”. Tyranny emerges as a result of the weakness of opposition.	Crutchfield (1955) found conformity operates when participants are not face to face. Jahoda(1959) identified types of conformity.
Methodology	Has experimental realism. Zimbardo was not an impartial observer. Ethical issues have not made this easily replicable.	Good example of a controlled laboratory experiment. However, the focus is mainly on male behaviour- it may not be representative of all the population. Robust evidence of cross-cultural reliability.
Implications	Human behaviour can be shaped by the demands of a situation or the role in it.	Human behaviour can be dramatically influenced by the presence and actions of other humans.
Cruelty	Right to withdraw denied. Deception occurred with the arrests (otherwise they obtained informed consent). Participants were debriefed. Some participants may have experienced humiliation and lasting psychological harm.	Deception was necessary and there was some damage to self-esteem but probably not lasting psychological harm.

Example Exam question

To what extent does the importance of **social influence** research justify the methods used in its investigation? 18 marks

To gain AO1 marks you should demonstrate some psychological knowledge accurately and in detail. In this case, it would be appropriate to use relevant studies such as Asch or Zimbardo (because this question is not restricted to conformity you could also include a study of obedience such as Milgram). There are only 6 marks available so do not attempt to cover everything.

To gain the 12 marks available for AO2 you need to show you can evaluate information and you need to address the question. You could take a study-by-study approach or an overall discussion of the topic. You will need to be aware of the BPS ethical guidelines and how each study infringes these. You will also need to know in what circumstances research may be carried out even though it may be unethical.

Glossary

In-group: the group to which a person belongs.

Collectivist cultures: where the individual is viewed as part of the family and society.

Conformity or majority influence: Where people adopt the behaviour, attitudes and values of a dominant or larger group. This can be a temporary or a permanent change and occurs because people want to be accepted or right.

Social influence: The effect of a group (majority) or individual (minority or authority figure) to change the thinking, attitudes and behaviour of others.

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Worksheet: Conformity

Name _____

1. What are the key differences between obedience and conformity?

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2. Outline the findings of the Zimbardo study and explain what they tell us about conformity.

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3. Why is social influence a problematic topic for psychologists to study?

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4. What do the findings of conformity studies tell us about human behaviour?

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5. State under what circumstances some research may be undertaken even though it may be unethical.

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6. Which explanation of conformity is most convincing?

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7. Why do some people not conform?

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