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TYPES OF CONFORMITY

Specification: Types of conformity: internalisation, identification and compliance. Explanations for conformity: informational social influence and normative social influence, and variables affecting conformity including group size, unanimity and task difficulty as investigated by Asch.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Describe the three types of conformity, including:
  - Compliance
  - Identification
  - Internalisation
- Outline and evaluate two explanations for conformity, including:
  - Informational social influence
  - Normative social influence
- Outline and evaluate Asch’s (1951) original research examining conformity.
- Outline and evaluate variations of Asch’s research which examined how different variables affect conformity, including:
  - Group size
  - Unanimity
  - Task difficulty

Types of Conformity

Conformity is a type of social influence that describes how a person changes their attitude or behaviour in response to group pressure. There are many different situations where people conform and psychologists have categorised three main types of conformity, including: compliance, identification and internalisation.

- Compliance is the shallowest level of conformity. Here a person changes their public behaviour, the way they act, but not their private beliefs. This is usually a short-term change and is often the result of normative social influence (NSI). For example, you might say that you like dub-step music because many other people in your class like dub-step music, however privately you can’t stand it.

- Identification is the middle level of conformity. Here a person changes their public behaviour and their private beliefs, but only while they are in the presence of the group. This is a usually a short-term change and normally the result of normative social influence (NSI). For example, a person may decide to become a vegetarian because all of their new flat mates are vegetarian. However, whenever they walk past a McDonald’s they can’t resist a Big Mac and when they are away from their flat mates they still eat meat. Identification takes place when we are surrounded by a particular group; we change our private beliefs while in the presence of the majority but not permanently.

- Internalisation is the deepest level of conformity. Here a person changes their public behaviour and their private beliefs. This is usually a long-term change and often the result of informational social influence (ISI). For example, if an individual is influenced by a group of Buddhists and converts to this faith, then their new religious way of life will continue without the presence of the group as they have internalised this belief.

Explanations for Conformity

In addition to the three types of conformity (compliance, identification and internalisation) which describe how people conform, there are also two explanations of why people conform, including:
normative social influence (NSI) and informational social influence (ISI).

**Normative social influence (NSI)** is when a person conforms to be accepted and to feel that they belong to the group. Here a person conforms because it is socially rewarding, or to avoid social rejection; for example, to avoid feeling that they don’t ‘fit in’. Normative social influence is usually associated with **compliance** and **identification**. With compliance, people change their public behaviour but not their private beliefs; with identification people change their public behaviour and their private beliefs, but only in the presence of the group. Therefore, this explanation of social influence leads to a short-term type of conformity, which is motivated by the desire to fit in with the majority.

**Informational social influence (ISI)** is when a person conforms to gain knowledge, or because they believe that someone else is ‘right’. Informational social influence is usually associated with **internalisation**, where a person changes both their public behaviour and their private beliefs, on a long-term basis. This semi-permanent change in behaviour and belief is the result of a person adopting a new belief system, because they genuinely believe that their new beliefs are ‘right’ or that the majority are ‘experts’. For example, if a person changes their political ideology from Conservative to Liberal, then they have internalised these new beliefs on a semi-permanent basis and believe that voting Liberal is ‘right’ for them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CHANGE IN PUBLIC BEHAVIOUR?</th>
<th>CHANGE IN PRIVATE BELIEF?</th>
<th>SHORT-TERM / LONG-TERM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMPLIANCE</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Short-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IDENTIFICATION</strong></td>
<td>Yes (Only in the presence of the majority)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Short-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTERNALISATION</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Long-term</td>
</tr>
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*Exam Hint: It is important to ensure that you understand the distinction between types of conformity (compliance, identification and internalisation) and the explanations for conformity (normative and informational social influence).*

**Evaluating Explanations for Conformity**

- Asch’s (1951) study into conformity (see below) provides research support for **normative social influence**. He found that many of the participants went along with the obviously wrong answers of the other group members. When asked by Asch in post-experimental interviews why they did this, participants said that they changed their answer to avoid disapproval from the rest of the group, which clearly shows that **compliance** had occurred as the participants conformed in order to ‘fit in’. Further to this, Asch demonstrated in a later variation (1955) that when the pressure to publicly conform is removed by asking participants to write down their answers on a piece of paper, rather than say them aloud, the conformity rates fell to 12.5% as the fear of rejection became far less.

- Jenness (1932, see below) provides research support for the role of **informational social influence**. Participants were asked to initially make independent judgements about the number of beans contained in a jar and then discuss their estimates in a group. Participants then made a second, individual private estimate. Jenness found that this second private estimate moved closer to the group estimate and that females typically conformed more. This shows that **internalisation** of group beliefs will occur especially in unfamiliar, ambiguous situations.
• **Individual differences** may play a role in explaining social influence, which means that the processes will not affect everyone’s behaviour in the same way. For example, Perrin and Spencer (1980) conducted an Asch-style experiment, but this time using engineering students in the UK. Only one conforming response was observed out of nearly 400 trials. This could be due to the fact that the students felt more confident in their ability to judge line lengths due to their experience in engineering and so felt less pressure to conform. Alternatively, it could be argued that this difference is due to a **historical bias** from comparing research conducted in a different era and almost 30 years apart where rapid social changes have emerged and norms have changed.

• There are real-world applications which demonstrate that **normative social influence** also occurs beyond the artificial laboratory setting. For example, Schultz et al. (2008) gathered data from many hotels over a week where guests were allocated to rooms randomly as either control or experimental conditions. In the control rooms, there was a door hanger informing the participants of the environmental benefits of reusing towels. In the experimental condition, there was additional information stating that ‘75% of guests chose to reuse their towels each day’. The results showed that in comparison to the control conditions, guests who received a message that contained normative information about other guests reduced their need for fresh towels by 25%, showing they had **conformed** in order to ‘fit in’ with the perceived group behaviour.

**Key Study: Jenness (1932)**

**Aim:** To examine whether individuals will change their opinion in an **ambiguous** (unclear) situation, in response to group discussion.

**Method:** Jenness used an ambiguous situation that involved a glass bottle filled with 811 white beans. His sample consisted of 26 students, who individually estimated how many beans that the glass bottle contained. Participants were then divided into groups of three and asked to provide a group estimate through discussion. Following the discussion, the participants were provided with another opportunity to individually estimate the number of beans, to see if they changed their original answer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MALES</th>
<th>FEMALES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AVERAGE ESTIMATE BEFORE</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVERAGE ESTIMATE AFTER</td>
<td>695</td>
<td>878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVERAGE CHANGE</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Results:** Jenness found that nearly all participants changed their original answer when they were provided with another opportunity to estimate the number of beans in the glass bottle. On average, male participants changed their answers by 256 beans and female participants changed their answers by 382 beans. Furthermore, the range of the whole group went from 1,875 before the discussion to 474 afterward, a decrease of 75 per cent, which demonstrates the converging opinions of the participants, after their discussions.

**Conclusion:** These results suggest that individuals changed their initial estimate due to **informational social influence**, as they believed that the group estimates were more likely to be correct, in comparison to their own.

**Key Study: Asch (1951)**

**Aim:** To examine the extent to which social pressure to conform from unanimous majority affects
conformity in an unambiguous situation.

**Method:** Asch’s sample consisted of 123 male undergraduate students from Swarthmore College in the USA, who believed they were taking part in a vision test. Asch used a line judgement task, where he placed one real (naïve) participant in a room with six to eight confederates (actors working on behalf of the experimenter), who had agreed their answers in advance. The naïve participant was deceived and was led to believe that the other people were also real participants. The real participant was always seated second from last.

In turn, each person had to say out loud which line (A, B or C) was most like the target line in length. Unlike Jenness’ experiment, the correct answer was always obvious. Each participant completed 18 trials and the confederates gave the same incorrect answer on 12 trials, called ‘critical trials’. Asch wanted to see if the real participant would conform to the majority view, even when the answer was clearly incorrect.

**Results:** Asch measured the number of times each participant conformed to the majority view. On average, the real participants conformed to the incorrect answers on 32% of the critical trials. 74% of the participants conformed on at least one critical trial and 26% of the participants never conformed. Asch also used a control group, in which one real participant completed the same experiment without any confederates. He found that less than 1% of the participants gave an incorrect answer.

**Conclusion:** Asch interviewed his participants after the experiment to find out why they conformed. Most of the participants said that they knew their answers were incorrect, but they went along with the group in order to fit in, or because they thought that they would be ridiculed. This confirms that participants complied due to normative social influence and the desire to fit in publicly without changing their private viewpoint.

**Evaluating Asch**

- Asch used a biased sample of 123 male students from colleges in America. Therefore, we cannot generalise the results to other populations, for example female students, as we are unable to conclude whether female students would have conformed in a similar way to male students. As a result, Asch’s sample lacks population validity and further research is required to determine whether males and females conform differently.

- Furthermore, it could be argued that Asch’s experiment has low levels of ecological validity. Asch’s test of conformity, a line judgement task, is an artificial task, which does not reflect conformity in everyday life which means the task lacks mundane realism. Consequently, we are unable to generalise the results of Asch to other real-life situations, such as why people may start smoking or drinking around friends, and therefore these results are limited in their application to everyday life.

- Asch’s research took place at a particular time in US history when conformity was arguably higher and has been criticised as being ‘a child of its time’. Since 1950, numerous psychologists have attempted to replicate Asch’s study, for example Perrin and Spencer (1980) using maths and engineering students, and found significantly lower levels of conformity. This suggests that Asch’s experiment lacks historical validity and the conformity rates found in 1950 may not provide an accurate reflection of conformity in modern times.

- Asch’s research is ethically questionable. He broke several ethical guidelines, including: deception and protection from harm. Asch deliberately deceived his participants, saying that they were taking part in a vision test and not an experiment on conformity. Although it is seen as unethical to deceive participants, Asch’s experiment required deception in order to achieve valid results. If the participants
were aware of the true aim they may have displayed **demand characteristics** and acted differently. In addition, Asch’s participants were not protected from psychological harm and many of the participants reported feeling stressed when they disagreed with the majority. However, Asch interviewed all of his participants following the experiment to overcome this issue.

**Variations of Asch**

Following Asch’s original research, numerous variations of his line judgement task were carried out in order to determine which factors influenced conformity levels. These variations include: **group size**, **unanimity** and **task difficulty**.

**Group Size**

Asch carried out many variations to determine how the size of the majority affects the rate of conformity. These variations ranged from one confederate to 15 confederates, and the level of conformity varied dramatically. When there was 1 confederate, the real participants conformed on just 3% of the critical trials. When the group size increased to two confederates, the real participants conformed on 12.8% of the critical trials. Interestingly, when there were three confederates, the real participants conformed on 32% of the critical trials, the same percentage as Asch’s original experiment, in which there were six to eight confederates. This demonstrates that conformity reaches its highest level with just three confederates, once a majority pressure is created.

Asch continued investigating group size and in one condition he used 15 confederates. In this experiment the rate of conformity slightly dropped (~29%). It is possible that the rate of conformity dropped because the real participants became suspicious of the experiment and not because the pressure to conform is necessarily less in larger groups.

**Unanimity**

Unanimity refers to the extent that members of a majority agree with one another. In Asch’s original experiment, the confederates all gave the same incorrect answer on the critical trials. In one variation of Asch’s experiment, one of the confederates was instructed to give the correct answer throughout. In this variation, the rate of conformity dropped to 5%. This demonstrates that if the real participant has support for their belief, then they are likely more likely to resist the pressure to conform. Furthermore, in another variation, one of the confederates gave a different incorrect answer to the majority. In this variation conformity still dropped significantly, by this time to 9%. This shows that if you break or disrupt the group’s unanimous position, then conformity is reduced significantly, even if the answer provided by the supporter is still incorrect.

**Task Difficulty**

In Asch’s original experiment, the correct answer was always obvious. In one of his variations he made the task more difficult, by making the difference between the line lengths smaller and therefore appear closer together and more ambiguous. In this variation, Asch found the rate of conformity increased, although he
didn’t report the percentage. This is likely to be the result of informational social influence, as individuals look to another for guidance when undertaking an ambiguous task, similar to the results found in Jenness’ experiment, in order to be ‘right’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIATION</th>
<th>CONFORMITY % (CRITICAL TRIALS)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group Size: 1 Confederate</td>
<td>Lower (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Size: 2 Confederates</td>
<td>Lower (12.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Size: 3 Confederates</td>
<td>Remained the same (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Size: 15 Confederates</td>
<td>Lower (~29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unanimity</strong> – Where one of the confederates gave the correct answer throughout.</td>
<td>Lower (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unanimity</strong> – Where one of the confederates gave a different incorrect answer to the majority.</td>
<td>Lower (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task Difficulty</strong> – Where the task was made significantly more difficult, by making the difference between the line lengths significantly smaller.</td>
<td>Higher*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The percentages were not published by Asch.

Extension Evaluation: Issues and Debates

- Social psychology acknowledges the role of situational factors, such as group pressure, in determining human behaviour such as conformity. However, it also suggests that individuals can exercise personal responsibility for their actions and demonstrate free will through showing independent behaviour.
- Explanations of conformity (NSI/ISI) adopt a nomothetic approach as they attempt to provide general principles relating to human behaviour when observed under group pressure from a majority.
- Social psychology uses scientific methods, often in highly-controlled laboratory settings, to investigate key concepts which can be replicated, for example, Asch’s original study. However, the fact that Asch only used male participants in his sample shows a beta bias, as his research may have ignored or minimised the differences between men and women in relation to conformity.

Possible Exam Questions

1. Which one of the following is an explanation of conformity? (1 mark)
   a) Compliance
   b) Identification
   c) Group size
   d) Normative social influence

2. One type of conformity is compliance. What do social psychologists mean by the term compliance? (1 mark)
   *Exam Hint: Responses must refer to compliance as private disagreement whilst publicly going along with the majority for credit to be awarded.*

3. Identify which two of the following are types of conformity. Only shade two boxes. (2 marks)
   a) Compliance
   b) Agentic state
   c) Group size
   d) Unanimity
4. It is Ajay’s first day in a new job and he spends lots of time observing his work colleagues, so that he will fit in with them and be approved of. Explain Ajay’s behaviour in terms of compliance. (2 marks)

Exam Hint: It is imperative to read and note the way in which this question is worded. In order to answer it properly, compliance must be described and applied to Ajay’s scenario, not normative social influence.

5. The following comments refer to alternative types of conformity. Select two phrases which best describe internalisation. Only select two boxes. (2 marks)
   a) The deepest level of conformity
   b) Where a person goes along with a majority but does not agree with them
   c) The beliefs of the group become part of the person’s own beliefs
   d) Where a person goes along publicly while privately disagreeing
   e) A short-term change in a person’s beliefs.

6. What is meant by normative social influence. (2 marks)

Exam Hint: Students often try to enhance their definitions with an example to demonstrate their understanding, but this is not compulsory for this simple question.

7. Alexandra has recently started working at a new office. On her first day in her new role she noticed that all her work colleagues were more smartly dressed than she was. Explain the likely effect that normative social influence will have on Alexandra’s future behaviour. (2 marks)

Exam Hint: It is possible for candidates to take a simple approach to this question. For example, explaining that Alexandra is likely to dress smarter next time to fit in with the colleagues at her new work place will earn full marks.

8. Explain what is meant by informational social influence. (3 marks)

Exam Hint: The key issue with a three-mark explanation question, such as this, is the way in which some students use examples as means of elaborating their responses. Simply writing “this was shown in Asch’s study” without explaining how or why this shows informational social influence will gain no additional marks.

9. Describe the procedure of Asch’s study into conformity. (4 marks)

10. A school council committee must decide what to do with some money left over in the school fund before the end of term. Most of the students want to give the money to their favourite local charity. However, two individuals, Lena and Simon, want to buy a snooker table for the common room in the sixth form.

   Briefly explain two factors which might affect whether Lena and Simon will conform to the rest of the school council committee or not. (4)

Exam Hint: A common snag for this question is muddling explanations and factors. This means that students can often focus their discussion on normative and informational social influence rather than the factors which the question actually demands, such as social support or group size. Additionally, some students fail to get the second mark for one or both of the factors they identify, as they only state that it will affect conformity, but do not explain how.

11. Jane and Norma have just completed their second year at university studying for a degree in psychology. They lived in shared accommodation with five other students all of whom were very health conscious. As a result, their housemates only ate organic food produce. Jane had listened to their standpoint on this lifestyle choice and now she only eats organic food produce too. Norma was content
to eat organic food whilst living in the house with the others, but when she went home for the holidays she consumed whatever her mum had bought or made for her. Both girls conformed, but for two different reasons.

Explain which type of conformity each girl – Jane and Norma – was showing. (2 marks)

**Exam Hint:** Since this question is asking for an explanation rather than using the command word ‘identify’, it is expected that students will justify their choice with reference to the stem.

12. Explain what is meant by internalisation. (3 marks)

**Exam Hint:** Secure answers to this question will attempt to explain the term by referring to public and private behaviour change as well as the duration of the change itself. It is possible to gain credit by mentioning informational social influence as well. Students should be careful when providing examples of conformity; however, often they often fail to add to what they have already offered as a response.

13. Asch’s research was conducted in a laboratory setting. Outline one strength and one limitation of conducting psychological research such as this in a laboratory. (4 marks)

14. David is taking his Year 1 Psychology exam and has answered a tricky multiple-choice question. He thinks the correct answer is ‘C’. He strains to look at the exam papers of the students sitting either side of him in the exam hall and glimpses that Monica, a very clever student, has selected ‘B’. As a result, he opts to amend his answer to ‘B’ as well. Using your knowledge and understanding of conformity, explain two reasons why David changed his response from C to B. (4 marks)

15. Outline Asch’s findings in relation to two variables which affect conformity. Briefly explain two limitations of Asch’s conformity research. (8 marks)

**Exam Hint:** Students are not required to describe Asch’s original study. Group size, unanimity and task difficulty are the most likely variables affecting conformity which students will outline. Explaining possible reasons for the increased or decreased conformity seen in the variations of the study is not required. Note that generic evaluation points, limitations in this case, are never creditworthy.

16. Discuss research into conformity. (8 marks)

**Exam Hint:** A danger with this question is that some students are not aware that the word ‘discuss’ demands both knowledge and evaluation in the response. Many students can write confidently about Asch (including the variations). Often, confusion occurs with the terms conformity and obedience (which is not relevant to this question). It is also worth drawing attention to the fact that Moscovici’s research is a study investigating minority influence, not a study of conformity (majority influence).

17. Outline and evaluate research into conformity. (12/16 marks)

**Exam Hint:** The most common study students opt to outline here Asch’s research and/or his variations. Students often demonstrate confidence when describing his procedures but they can occasionally struggle with reporting his findings accurately and in sufficient detail. The word research in the questions also indicates that students could also refer to explanations and/or types of conformity. Often students can forget to refer to the work of Perrin and Spencer in order to create an effective and well-elaborated evaluation of Asch’s original research. Secure evaluation points are always specific to the study described, for example explaining that Asch’s research was a ‘child of its time’ and the results are therefore era dependent. Students should spend time making their evaluation pertinent to the study they are discussing, rather than presenting generic comments that could apply to any psychological research in general.

18. Read the item below and then answer the question which follows.
Anna always phones her friends to ask what they are going to wear before she gets ready for a girl’s night out. She does this because she doesn’t like being the odd one out in her group of friends.

Mark watches what his work colleagues do really carefully when he starts his new job in a factory. He does this so that he can identify where to put his personal belongings during his shift and how long he should take for a lunch break so as not to get into trouble.

Discuss two explanations for conformity. Refer to Anna and Mark in your discussion. (12 marks)

Exam Hint: Possible applications that students can explain in their responses for this question are that Anna’s change in behaviour is due to normative social influence. She is wanting to fit in with what her friends are wearing (the majority) in order to go along with the norm, even though she might privately disagree with their fashion choices. Conversely, Mark is seeing his work colleagues as experts and a source of reliable information which demonstrates informational social influence in action. As a result, he will put his personal belongings in the right place at the factory and take the appropriate amount of break time for lunch.

19. Discuss at least two factors that have been shown to affect conformity. Refer to variations of Asch’s experiment in your answer. (12/16 marks)

Exam Hint: The most likely factors which students will discuss are those named on the specification: the effects of group size, unanimity and task difficulty. Students must make sure not to confuse factors affecting conformity with explanations of conformity.

20. Outline and evaluate normative social influence and informational social influence as explanations of conformity. (12/16 marks)
## Checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specification</th>
<th>Content</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conformity</strong></td>
<td>Types of conformity: internalisation, identification and compliance. Explanations for conformity: ISI and NSI. Variables affecting conformity: group size, unanimity and task difficulty as investigated by Asch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conformity to social roles</strong></td>
<td>Conformity to social roles as investigated by Zimbardo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explanations for obedience</strong></td>
<td>Explanations for obedience: agentic state and legitimacy of authority, and situational variables affecting obedience including proximity, location and uniform, as investigated by Milgram.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dispositional explanations</strong></td>
<td>Dispositional explanation for obedience: The Authoritarian Personality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resisting social influence</strong></td>
<td>Explanations of resistance to social influence, including social support and locus of control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Minority influence</strong></td>
<td>Minority influence including reference to consistency, commitment and flexibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social change</strong></td>
<td>The role of social influence processes in social change.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>