

Lesson Five

Conformity

Aims

The aims of this lesson are to enable you to

- understand what is meant by the term “Social Influence”
- appreciate and understand the importance of social norms
- distinguish different types of conformity, including internalisation, identification and compliance
- identify factors affecting conformity, including those investigated by Asch
- evaluate explanations for conformity, including informational social influence and normative social influence
- understand conformity to social roles as discussed by Zimbardo
- understand the importance of social identity theory in relation to conformity

Context

Social psychology is the scientific study of the nature and causes of all human social interactions. In particular, social influence focuses on the way that other people affect our thoughts, feelings and behaviour as we interact in our social world. Other people can cause us to behave in ways that enable us to fit in with a certain group (conformity) or to behave entirely in a way that someone else wishes (obedience) or even make us change our mind (minority influence). We will be looking at three areas in this lesson.



Lawton & Willard: *AQA A-level Psychology Book 1*, pp. 1-16.

The Study of Social Influence

Our actions are influenced by the society that we live in. We are always conscious of “what other people will think” and, wherever possible, we tend to choose the course of action which we think will keep other people happy or impress them most.

A simple definition of **social influence** would be that it “occurs whenever an individual responds to the actual or implied presence of one or more others” (Hollander, 1981).

This definition implies that we do not always see ourselves in an equal relationship with other people. In some situations, you may perceive yourself to be the top dog, with influence and control of other people or situations; in other situations, you perceive to be at a disadvantage, being governed by others or without influence. Examples of these will be the leading goal scorer in your football team will be hailed as a hero and given superior status; whereas if you are the subject of bullying you will know only too well the negative effects a group or an individual can apply to one person.

You can see that neither of these two ‘statuses’ occurs in isolation. They are created by being part of a group or not being part of a group.

This brings us on to the idea of what makes us part of a group, and how do we know what ‘rules’ exist that we must comply with in order to belong. This is the concept of conformity.

First of all though, let us consider group norms and how they affect our behaviour, as this underpins conformity, obedience and all aspects of social influence.

Group Norms and Conformity

Social norms are standards of behaviour or routine expectations. A norm usually covers a *range* of possible behaviour and establishes boundaries beyond which behaviour would be abnormal or unacceptable.

A **group norm** is therefore a standard set by a particular set of individuals. This set could be society as a whole, as in it is expected that all children should go to school, or some subset within that society (e.g. a family, a scout troop or a business organisation). Most of us belong to several sets simultaneously; we are family members, we belong to a hockey club, we work for the local authority, we are members of a particular church, and so on.

Each set or group will have a different set of norms. These differences may be only slight and cause us no practical problems or they may be drastic. The hockey club has arranged a match for Sunday and our church forbids us from taking part in sporting events on a Sunday. Do we play or not?

Often we find that group norms are **unspoken**, unofficial (or informal) and ever-changing. As the make-up of the group changes, as personalities come and go, the expected course of action may suddenly change.

When group norms are formalised (e.g. in the form of laws), there is usually some form of decision-making process. The way decisions are made will depend on the structure of the organisation.

A **hierarchy** is a common system of ranking in organisations, which is very relevant to the topics of conformity and obedience.

For instance, in a school, the head teacher is the leader of both the school pupils and the staff, and therefore has authority over both and is able to make decisions for the school as a whole. Pupils are expected to obey the head teacher. All members of the school conform to many unwritten rules about behaviour and how the school runs effectively.

A class teacher is the leader of his/her pupils but in a lower rank than the head teacher, therefore sometimes, the teacher will refer to the head teacher for advice and recommendations. On the other hand, the class teacher expects the children in his/her class to obey him or her.

The pupil is at the bottom of the chain or hierarchy and therefore has no authority over the teacher or the head teacher, and indeed is expected to conform and obey their every word.

In each case, the level of influence of each person within the group is clearly defined so that the school as an organisation runs smoothly.

Group Norms within other less formal social groups can be quite vague and agreed by everyone, as in the rules for playing games such as cards or marbles. They can change to suit everyone on any occasion. This flexibility leads to change and creates interest and allows society to develop without too many constraints.

Inevitably, we need to be willing to comply with 'higher' rules in some circumstances and to know when we can break the rules without detriment to ourselves. We steer a fine balance when we conform.

However, in order for society to work effectively and efficiently a certain amount of conformity to group norms is necessary. Imagine what it would be like if every person in the workplace decided that

they would be on flexi-time with no regard to anyone else. No work would get done, and it would be chaos!

Generally, group norms work for the benefit of everyone, and even though they are unspoken rules, they are adhered to as each individual gains something from conforming. They do not have to agree with the social norms but they will still comply. This is known as **compliance**. When a situation goes awry, then an individual or more in the group may decide that the group norm need changing and this can cause serious aggravation if it meets resistance. This is a factor in **minority influence**.

So although group norms are not specified on your syllabus as an area of study, it is important to recognise the affect they have.

Conformity

Conformity has been broadly described by **Mann** (1969) as “yielding to group pressure”, which in itself means that we behave in a different way according to how we see other people behaving around us. Conformity is also known as **majority influence**, which occurs when people adopt the behaviour, attitudes or values of the majority.

Everybody succumbs to external pressure 'at some time in their life, whether it is just to make life simpler or because you are fond of someone, or it helps you to know how to behave in a new situation, or you want to be part of a group, or to complete a task. There are lots of reasons why we conform, and it is not necessarily a bad thing. It is a way that we adapt to our environment and is a form of compromise.

A simple example might be of a football crowd, all seated in their rows at the start of the match. No-one is standing at this point as everyone wants to be able to see the game. However, the minute a goal is scored everyone jumps up out of their seat, leaping and waving their arms about and generally showing their enthusiasm for their team. Have you ever tried remaining in your seat and remaining composed when everyone else around you is going mad for their team? If you have, the chances are that you would have felt quite uncomfortable, as your behaviour is different from the majority and you are now in the minority and this in itself draws attention to you.

You might be able to think of other situations where conformity happens on a regular basis. In the Activity below, think how conforming or not conforming will affect the individual.

Activity 1**Experiences of Conformity**

Situation 1: You are at a club / dance and the DJ puts on the old 'disco' classic "YMCA". Immediately, a very enthusiastic dancer starts doing the arm movements associated with the track.

- a) Do you join in and conform or do something else? Describe your reaction. (2 marks)



- b) How do you feel about your decision to conform or not to conform? (2 marks)

- c) What factors might have affected your decision? (2 marks)

Situation 2: You have been invited to a fancy dress party, where you are expected to wear Pantomime outfits.

- a) What is your reaction to the invitation, and why have you responded in this way? (3 marks)
- b) Can you think of a way a different person may have reacted, and why? (3 marks)

Even though you have not been told any theory about conformity you will already be thinking like a psychologist, trying to work out how you should behave or others will behave in those situations. We will look at research studies that have been done on conformity shortly, but first of all we will look at the theories that have been proposed as to why people conform.

Factors affecting Conformity

We said earlier that conformity is often called **Majority Influence**. This is when a large group of people have the same opinion or behave in the same way in a situation. It can be quite hard joining a

group that clearly has a certain viewpoint, even if you believe in it yourself. The majority has a power that exerts an influence on outsiders.

Think about your answers to the activity now.

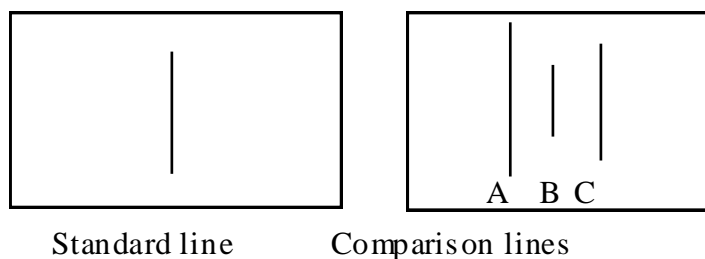
Group Size

Group Size: Did the *number* of people in the group matter in your answers? It is likely that you said “maybe”, “in some situations”, so group size may be a factor but may not be the only factor. Research has shown that the *more people behaving in an identical way* does increase conformity when the person conforming has little knowledge or experience of a type of behaviour or when a lack of conformity would single them out and make them look very exposed. Confidence in one’s own beliefs and personality might make you behave differently, as would other individuals breaking the mould so we cannot take for granted that a large group will automatically make you conform.

Study: Asch (1951): The effects of group size on conformity.

AIM - To see if people would give a clearly wrong answer to a simple question when other confederates gave wrong answers, thereby showing conformity.

METHOD - He designed a series of single line tests, whereby he asked participants to say which line was the longer of two lines on a white sheet of paper. The difference was obvious in most cases. He asked colleagues to act as ‘confederates’, and to give the wrong answer. The real participant being studied was the last person to give his answer and therefore s/he heard and saw the full range of responses before s/he gave his/her own response.



RESULTS: Participants gave correct answers much of the time, depending on the size of the group. However, 75% of participants conformed at least once. 36.8% of the answers of the real participants were incorrect. If tested on their own, without confederates present, they gave correct answers 100% of the time.

CONCLUSION: The results indicate that conformity to group pressure did take place, at least on some occasions.

EVALUATION:

- a) When debriefed, the real participants said they had been influenced by the group, although secretly they did not believe the answers they gave. They did not want to appear foolish in the eyes of the other people.
- b) When looking to respond to a question, we bring to mind social expectations, social norms and previous experience.
- c) The confederates had no apparent reason to lie in this simple task, and therefore the real participants trusted their judgment over their own in this situation.
- d) This would be fine if there were any doubt about the correct answers as they would be gaining information, but when the answers were clearly wrong much of the time, this is not convincing. More convincing is that the real participants did not want to rock the boat by expressing their real opinion.
- e) But, we also have to be critical of the interpretation of the results. If we were to look at every single test Asch did, we would discover that overall people **only conformed about a third of the time**. That puts a completely different complexion on the argument. It might have been statistically significant, but it still means that two thirds of the time people were prepared to say what they think! In fact, Asch himself acknowledged this, so it is a bit of a surprise that his study has been heralded as a clear study of conformity, when he stated it was as much a study in non-conformity.

This latter point makes clear that retelling of an event can cause it to have greater significance than it had at the time – an interesting thought not just for this lesson, but also takes us back to Bartlett's reconstructive memory and implications for eyewitness testimony, as we conform to social norms in those situations too.

- f) It was an artificial situation, where the answer did not matter. It would not affect their lives. They might just feel stupid for a while! Laboratory studies like this do not represent what goes on in the real world.

The Effect of Unanimity

In a variation of this study, Asch had different sizes of group, from 1 confederate and 1 participant to 8 confederates to 1 participant. This time he found that the smaller the group, the less the conformity, but after a certain number i.e. 3 confederates to 1 participant, conformity plateaued, which shows that **unanimity** is more important than group size.

Later research (**Gerard**, 1968; **Latané & Wolf**, 1981) found that the conformity rate would carry on increasing (but by less each time)

the more unanimous confederates you added. But the key point was the participant's perception of the independence of each of the other group members. If they all seemed to be sheep following one group leader, it was easier to voice a dissenting opinion than if all the others had apparently reached their (wrong) answers after careful independent consideration.

But a big difference could be made in the conformity rate if the unanimity of the rest of the group was broken. If out of the eight stooges (confederates), one person got the answer right and seven got it wrong, the participant was far more likely to get it right — much more so than in a unanimous group of three, for instance.

In another variation, the fourth person to speak gave the correct answer on the first half of the critical trials but the wrong answer in the second half. The conformity rate was found to switch from 5.5% to 32% at that point. Having just one supporter for your own view reduces the stress of dissent greatly, especially if you respect and identify with the views of that other dissenter. But the figure of 32% for the second half of the test showed that participants' ability to dissent had not been permanently changed.

Ambiguity / Difficulty of Task

Another key variable in this sort of experiment is the nature of the test situation. How *easy* is the test and how *unambiguous* is the answer? Even the test devised by Asch was not as easy as it could have been. As tests get harder and more ambiguous, conformity rates go up.

If people are so easily swayed when they do a simple task like this, you can see how important the instinct for conformity will be in more complex social situations. If all your friends say that immigrants should be sent back to the country of their origin, it is very stressful for you to disagree with them – you risk losing your friends or being excluded for a particular social group. It is much easier to echo their views and rationalize it in your own mind, find reasons why they could be right, etc. We agree with others because they have the power to accept or reject, reward or punish us.

Sherif (1935) used **the autokinetic effect** to explore conformity when there is an element of doubt. The autokinetic effect involves looking at a single point of light in a darkened room.



Muzafer Sherif

If you look at it for long enough the light seems to move, even if it is stationary. **Sherif** (1935) found that if he asked a group to estimate the degree to which a stationary light moved, then they would converge their estimates towards a group norm estimate. **Brown** (1985) suggests that the reason behind this is because individuals


have a need to be in agreement with one another, especially in ambiguous situations.

In this task, which is genuinely quite difficult to do, as it involves memory and perception along with an immediate response, seeking guidance from other people in an ambiguous situation is to be expected and itself a social norm. If this had not been a study, and instead participants were looking at the night sky and trying to decide how far two stars are away from each other, the individuals would most likely have grouped together to seek the answer and would have come up with a single answer, showing conformity in real life.



Solomon Asch

Asch (1951) was critical of the ambiguity in Sherif's experiment as he felt it did not show how group pressure could affect results when there was clearly a right and a wrong answer (as opposed to asking for an estimate). In Asch's study there was a discrepancy between what the participants believed and their behavior, a conflict between their inward thought and outward behaviour'. While this is true, Sherif's study explored something different and is equally valuable as a study.

Activity 2	Factors in Conformity Studies such those of Asch and Sherif have long-lasting effects on society. Do you think they are good and effective studies that we should take notice of?
	

Types of Conformity

Kelman (1958) suggests that there are three types of conformity: **compliance, internalization and identification**. The specification states that you must be able to define and distinguish between these different types of conformity.

Definition of Compliance

Compliance refers to a change in behaviour that is *requested* by another person or group. (Breckler, Olson, & Wiggins, 2006).

It can be thought of as acting according to the wishes of another to gain their approval or avoid disapproval. Therefore, you agree with the majority in public whilst in private you adhere to your own beliefs. For instance, you might disagree with the idea of Council Tax and yet you still pay your Council Tax bill. The act of payment (compliance) does not change your views in itself.

You may read in textbooks that the participants in Asch's study were complying as they did not truly believe their own answers. However, they were not being *asked* to behave in a specific way, so they were not going along with someone else's wishes. No-one was making any demands of them, so it is better to think of Asch's study as one of conformity "yielding to group pressure" rather than of compliance. However, this is the closest we can get to understanding Asch's study in relation to Kelman's *types* of conformity.

Cialdini (1994) suggests that there are a number of factors that make us more likely to comply with a request. These are:

- **Authority** if the request is made by an authoritative figure.
- **Social Validation** if we believe that the request is something that others similar to ourselves would do.
- **Friendship or liking** if the request is made by someone we like.
- **Reciprocity** if we owe the person making the request a favour.
- **Scarcity** if we think that the opportunity is rare or in short supply.
- **Commitment or consistency** –if we have already committed ourselves to a course of action.

Compliance in Real Life

Techniques used by business to persuade us to comply (Freedman & Fraser, 1966)

We comply with other people's requests every day of our lives. For instance, at Christmas, your friends and family give you a wish list of possible presents. You will no doubt feel quite strongly, at least on one or two occasions, that they don't need what they have asked for or that what they have asked for is a waste of money but you still buy your friends and family what they have asked for. You have complied.

However, in the business world, persuading you to comply is what marketing and selling are all about. The electronics and white goods companies spend a lot of money on persuading you to comply with their wish that you should buy their goods, and salespeople use a variety of techniques to lure you in.

You know, for instance, that you would like to buy the latest iPad, but you can't afford it, so you have decided not to buy it.

You see an advert on the TV, advertising an iPad, the one you really really want, at a knock-down price. You reach for your phone and full of excitement you make the call. When the operator responds, it turns out that there were some hidden charges, but you are now committed so go along with it and buy your brand new iPad regardless. This technique of compliance is known as **Low Ball Technique**, and is regarded as an underhand means of getting someone to comply. Unfortunately, it is used by a lot of telecommunications companies, which rather suggests that it works.

Another standard ploy is the **Foot in the Door Technique**, whereby a seller invites you to try out their product, e.g. a new snack, with the idea that you will go on to buy a full pack. Ladies will be familiar with this technique in the beauty section of large stores. They will give you a free consultation and let you try out products and then expect you to buy some at full price. A little gets you a lot!

The **That's Not All** Technique is when something is added on to the offer to make it look like a bargain. A business may not have enough margin on a particular item to be able to sell it to you at a price that you want to pay. So, once you are making your enquiry, they add on extras which they can afford to 'give away' at a knockdown price to make it easier for you to make your decision to buy the big, expensive shiny TV.

Another technique is the **Door in The Face** Technique, which doesn't sound very appealing. This means you enter into a commitment to buy something large or expensive and therefore have a vested interest to go back and buy more, smaller items from the same seller again and again. Apple has developed its whole market around this concept, and it keeps selling smaller products at much more expensive prices than Android because people have bought into the Apple 'concept'.

You can see how much we comply through these examples. You can also see that it is not necessary to be in a group to show compliance. It has to be said, we do agree to their wishes. We are not completely mindless and uninvolved with our decision-making when we comply. So there are different degrees of compliance.

Original Study of Compliance – Housewives and two requests (Freedman & Fraser, 1966)

Aim: To see if the act of complying with a small request would create greater compliance when presented with a large request

Method: 1156 housewives were divided into 4 groups. The first three groups were contacted by telephone on two separate occasions. The first time they were presented with a small request and the second time a large request. The fourth group were only contacted once, with a large request.

The small request was to answer a few questions on household products.

The second request was to allow a confederate (unknown to the housewives) to come into their home to catalogue their household products for a two hour period.

Results: Of those who had originally been contacted and had responded in the first situation, **52.8% of housewives complied with the second request** to let some stranger into their home for two hours. In the fourth group who were contacted just the once only **22.2%** of the people who were contacted for the first time agreed.

Conclusion: The researchers concluded that a person's attitude was manipulated and affected by first being presented with a small request that they had agreed to. Thereafter, to maintain consistency, they would have to agree to the larger request when asked.

Evaluation: Although significant in relation to those who were only presented with the large request, 52.8% of housewives is only just over half of the sample. Remember, if we toss a coin it has a 50:50 chance of being 'heads'. 47.2% did *not* comply, which is still a large number of the housewives. This might indicate that personality plays a factor, or the tone of the phone call, or the gender of the caller might be a factor.

They then carried out a similar study asking people to place a small sign promoting good driving in their home window or their car. The bigger request, which followed after the smaller request, was to put a large billboard in their garden for a totally different concept. They found similar results even though the large billboard had very little to do with the initial request.

Beaman carried out a meta-analysis of compliance studies several years later and found that the effect was not as great as suggested, but it could be that the general public is now more informed and aware and less susceptible to salesman manipulation!

Internalisation

Internalisation involves going along with others because you have accepted their point of view as it is consistent with your own. Therefore, someone conforms because they are truly persuaded that the group is correct, so their own beliefs correspond to the group norm. This could be said to correspond with the type of conformity shown in Sherif's study.

Internalisation occurs when you join a club or a political party, where ideas have already been set out. You support them and therefore show your allegiance to your chosen club or party. It could even be about the type of school you send your child to. You are likely to choose a school in accordance with your beliefs, so you will expect to comply with its ethos, even if there are minor aspects that you do not believe in. Complying in this sense confirms your own self-worth as well, in that other people share your sense of values.

Identification

Identification is the process of going along with others because you have accepted their point of view because of a desire to be like them and be able to relate to them and them to you. An individual will change their behaviour and opinions so as to be regarded as part of the influencing groups. For example, when a student starts university they may start to dress in a particular fashion style to identify themselves with their new crowd of friends.

People will go to great extremes to conform to their idols. This can be as trivial as mimicking a pop star or as serious as identifying with an extreme terrorist group.

Identification is a 'no holds barred' concept. You cannot only partially identify with a group. You are in or you are out. Your sense of belonging to the group is profound and also deeply personal.

This is very closely linked to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel), which tells us that being a part of a group *creates* our identity and enables us to have a sense of who we are in relation to others.

Kelman argues that conformity serves three purposes:

- Group acceptance, as in compliance.
- Group membership, as in identification.
- Acceptance of group norms, as in internalization.

Activity 3

Apply the theories of types of conformity to your answers to Activity 1.

Read your previous answers and decide whether Internalisation, Identification or Compliance was the overriding factor in your answer.



Explanations for Conformity

Informational Social Influence and Normative Social Influence

According to **Deutsch and Gerard** (1955), there are two different explanations of social influence that leads people to conform: *informational* social influence and *normative* social influence.

Informational Social Influence is when we accept the majority viewpoint because it is most likely to be right. This is based on our tendency to depend on others as a source of information. In situations in which we are not sure how to behave we look to others in order to decide what to do. Sherif's 1935 study provides an example of informational social influence.

Normative Social Influence has at its roots the desire to 'fit in' with the group. We need to know what is 'normal' in that situation. We will alter our behaviour to be liked and accepted as a member of the group and to avoid being rejected. This was the major influence in Asch's research where participants could see clearly which line was the correct one. They did not need information so, in this study, informational influence was irrelevant.

Another example might be peer pressure.

Individual Differences

However, these interpretations or categories are a little simplistic. They totally ignore an individual's personality and what effect that might have on conformity.

- a) They do not consider whether someone is ill or well.
- b) Educational background can make a difference. Studies have shown that it is often lower status individuals (or people who feel insecure) who conform more.
- c) How much they care about the task they are doing is another factor. Aramovich et al (2012) found that people who had strong moral views were much less susceptible to conformity than those who had no opinion either way and indeed relished their individuality and chance to shine with their different views.
- d) It is worth noting that 95% of people see themselves as less conforming than their peers. This is statistically impossible, and suggests that conformity is perceived as a negative attribute, one not to own up to (Hornsey & Jetten, 2015).

You can see that individual differences should not be ignored and will strongly affect how we perceive groups and social norms. They should be considered as a part of normative social influence in particular, though individual differences will also be a factor in the way we receive and respond to informational social influence.

Additional reading:

www.ool.co.uk/0918pa

Additional viewing: www.ool.co.uk/0918pa2

Conformity to Social Roles - Zimbardo

Social Roles

A **social role** is a position we take in society which marks out what we do and how we fit in to a certain group. We may have many different social roles, and in each one we are expected to show a certain type of behaviour typical to the situation.

You will belong to many different groups and wear many different 'hats'. If you think about an activity you are involved with, you can consider how you are expected to behave in that role, and what happens when it goes wrong. This can be work or leisure.

For instance, if you are a waiter, you are expected to dress neatly, be clean, courteous, trustworthy, efficient, a good communicator, deliver the orders correctly, etc. Many different skills make up your social role, but they all rely on you connecting in some sense with other people.

If however, you were to turn up with dirty hair and finger-nails and be verbally abusive to the customers, you would most likely be dismissed and one would wonder why you bothered to take on the position because clearly you are not suited for that social role.

There is an understanding of what is required in each social role. In the workplace this is often set out in a Job Specification.

Our behaviour in our social roles is shaped by other people's expectations, for example in a waiter's job by the employer and the customer.

One of the interesting topics in this area is whether we fit a social role or make the social role fit us. It is quite an important question because if we as individuals have to fit in to an existing role we have little control over it. If, on the other hand, we can mould a social role to fit our personality and therefore make it our own, we have more power over our social group and can be more influential.

Study: Zimbardo et al (1973) – prison simulation experiment, a study of social roles



Philip Zimbardo

Aim: To see how people adapt to social roles

Procedure: 24 student volunteers were asked to role-play prisoners and guards in a prison simulation experiment. The participants were selected on the basis of being emotionally stable and having a clean bill of health. They were randomly assigned to the role of prisoner or guard.

The 'prison' was designed to be as realistic as possible. The prisoners were arrested, finger-printed, strip-searched and treated for fleas and mites, after which they were given a standard uniform to wear, and were issued numbers. The guards also wore uniforms, had a whistle, handcuffs and dark glasses.

Results: Both prisoners and guards soon adopted the roles they were given, to an extraordinary degree. The guards became increasingly aggressive and abusive, and seemed to enjoy throwing their weight about. Without being told to do so, they gave the prisoners jobs such as to clean out the toilets with their bare hands. The prisoners became dejected and withdrawn, and showed signs of extreme stress, such as crying.

The study was designed to run for two weeks, but it had to be stopped after six days because of the distress being caused to the prisoners.

Conclusion: Zimbardo reached the conclusion that people can very easily adopt social roles outside of their normal roles, which may show a completely different side to their personality.

Evaluation: This study is often criticized on ethical grounds, quite rightly, but keep in mind that the study was stopped as soon as it was clear that distress was being caused.

The participants, guards and prisoners were paid. Payment can cause people to behave in a socially desirable way, so the participants may have exaggerated their behaviour.

It was not a true situation, and although the experimenters tried hard to replicate a prison environment, none of these people were prisoners or guards in their real life. They were taking on the social norms associated with those particular roles. Their personalities may be very different from those of actual prisoners or guards.

Nonetheless, the study does show that we can internalize social roles and identify with groups in society given the right circumstances. It also shows obedience which we will turn to shortly, in that the prisoners obeyed the guards, which social norms dictate, when cleaning out the toilets, for instance.

Zimbardo (2007) has continued to develop his theory in relation to good and evil. He describes the point in time when an ordinary person first crosses that boundary between good and evil to engage in an evil action as the “**Lucifer Effect**”. He argues that anyone can become an oppressor given the right circumstances. In this case, the crossing was made when the pretend-guards appeared to lose their natural human nature and take on the bullying role of true guards.

You might like to look up more information on this study, which is widely reported in the literature as the Stanford Prison Experiment.

You can find a 30 minute documentary on this study at www.ool.co.uk/0920pa

You can also read an extended summary of this study in Banyard & Grayson’s book “Introducing Psychological Research” (Palgrave, Macmillan).

Philip Zimbardo himself has given a TED talk on the Psychology of Evil, which you may find interesting to listen to.

www.ool.co.uk/0921pa

Opposition to Zimbardo’s interpretation of his study

The Stanford Prison Study was widely broadcast and accepted, not just in psychological institutions but by the public at large.

However, it has been argued quite convincingly that he misreported information (Haslam & Reicher, 2012).

In reality only 30% of the 'guards' became obscenely obsessed with their power, lording it over the prisoners. One, in particular, was nicknamed "John Wayne" because of the way he walked, and much of the theory has developed around this one man's behaviour, which was considered to be quite inventive and used great imagination.

Other 'guards' tried to be "tough but fair", others reported trying to be "good" and do favours to the inmates.

In reality "John Wayne" was in the minority, so it is a little surprising that he had such a significant impact on the other guards that they conformed.

One of the problems with this study is that Zimbardo himself gave out instructions as to how the guards should behave, therefore some of the conformity at least was due to the instructions given at the start, which shows, too, obedience and conformity can be linked together. Zimbardo's involvement legitimized the use of force!

Social Identity Theory

Technically, social identity theory is not part of our syllabus, but it is very relevant to conformity. It tells us how we understand ourselves in relation to others. It is based on the idea that if we belong to one group, there will be an opposite group to which we don't belong. You can see that our sense of identity is involved in the formation of prejudice.

Taken at a more basic level, in any society, there is an in-group and an out-group. You can imagine that if you are in the in-group there is a lot of (normative) pressure to conform. A group of this nature develops its own norms, and often perceive themselves to be right or superior in some way, and you devalue other groups. The least that occurs is that the group forms a strong bond, which will dictate its thoughts and behaviours.

Study: Haslam & Reicher (2012) British Prison Study

A study was conducted by **Haslam & Reicher** (2012) replicating Zimbardo's study. It was called the **British Prison Study**, and the idea behind it was to try to make the situation more 'realistic'. In the original version, Zimbardo had strongly influenced how the guards and prisoners should behave, so prior expectations become

a factor in how they actually behaved. In a sense, they had been given permission to behave badly.

Haslam & Reicher wanted to show that people do not just 'fall into a role', that they do actually think about what they do in relation to others. This contrasts with Zimbardo's study when they were told how to behave. In this new study, the experiments tried to appear as unprogrammed as possible to others. This contrasts with Zimbardo's study when they were told how to behave.

They found that in this more natural environment the volunteer guards did not like their roles very much and did not want to exercise their authority. The guards disagreed with one another about how they should interpret their roles, and as a group they never developed a shared sense of identity. This in turn, led to disorganization and they struggled to maintain order. Had they maintained their social identity as a group, the situation might well have been different.

Compare this with the volunteer prisoners.

They saw the disarray the guards were in and began to develop their own group identity, working on plans to undermine the guards' authority. They began to mock and challenge them, until eventually they organized a break out.

The abstract of the study says the study shows "where members of low-status groups (prisoners in this case) are bound together by a shared sense of social identity, this can be the basis for effective leadership and organization, that allows them to secure support, challenge authority and promote social change in even the most extreme of situations" (Haslam & Reicher 2012). In order to achieve this, the prisoners developed norms for their group, to which they all conformed.

There is a lot more to the study, which you might like to read in your own time. It is very long, but very interesting. You can find it here at

www.ool.co.uk/0923pa

This study is also not without its critics, again because it is not a real prison. In any case, people do not volunteer to be guards or prisoners, but it does show that a minority lower-status group can develop strong resistance to the majority rule, by developing its own rules and shared status. We will look at the implications of this later in this module, when we explore the processes of social change and the need for social support. We will see how this study explains, to a degree, how individuals can rise and challenge authority in real situations.



Now read Lawton & Willard: *AQA A-level Psychology Book 1*, pp. 1-16.

Summary

Through this lesson we have learnt that conformity is an inevitable part of social life, and that we conform in different ways according to the demand characteristics of the situation.

Asch's study showed us that we don't want to look foolish by responding differently from those around us. Sherif showed us sometimes we need other people to help us to make sense of the world and we conform to their superior knowledge.

There are different types of conformity and different reasons for it. We often like to think that as individuals we are smart enough to be able to resist conforming or yielding to group pressure, but the Zimbardo study suggests that *everyone* is capable of behaving according to social roles, whether or not we personally believe that is true.

We are going to see how this can be taken to even greater extremes in our next lesson on Obedience.

Practice Test

1. What are group norms? Give an example.
2. Name two factors that may make us conform.
3. Did Asch's study show "informational social influence" or "normative social influence"? Explain your answer.
4. How did Sherif account for his results in the 'autokinetic' study?
5. What is the difference between compliance and conformity?
6. Name three ethical or methodological issues in Zimbardo's study. Could they have been prevented?
7. What effect does unanimity have on levels of conformity?
8. What is meant by "social role"?
9. Describe the distinguishing features of the British Prison Study.
10. Give an example of conformity in real life.

Suggested Answers to Activities

Activity 1:

No specific answers are required as everyone is an individual. The idea of this question was to get you thinking as a psychologist.

Activity 2:

Studies such those of Asch and Sherif have long-lasting implications for society. Do you think they are good and effective studies that we should take notice of?

These studies have provided a base line for all future studies of conformity. They may not each be the perfect study, but each theory that they designed to test has stood the test of time. They strongly supported the concepts of normative social influence and informational social influence and have contributed to our understanding of human behaviour.

(If this were a 'discuss' question on an examination paper, you would then describe their drawbacks, referring explicitly to the studies.

Activity 3:

You will "internalize" if you behave in a way that allowed you to fit it with the crowd. You will probably behave in a very similar way and feel it is expected that you should be like them, but you not have to hold the same view long term.

Once you "identify" with someone else or a group, you truly believe the same as them and are likely to try to persuade others likewise.

If you "comply" you will go along with what someone else wants, but most probably against your will or better judgment.