

ASCH CONFORMITY EXPERIMENTS

In a series of experiments from 1951 to 1955, social psychologist Solomon Asch wanted to answer a question: "Would you give the wrong answer just to fit in with a group?"

In 1951, Asch did his first experiments at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. The participants in his study were all white male college students, ages 17 to 25. He put the participants into groups of seven to nine. They were asked to take part in what seemed like a simple experiment about matching line lengths. Each participant saw a card with one line on it and another with three lines labeled A, B, and C. One of the three lines was the same length as the line on the first card, while the other two lines were clearly longer or shorter.

In reality, most of the participants were actually actors, and the real focus of the study was on how the one real participant or "test subject" would react. The actors were told how to respond to each set of cards before the experiment started. They pretended to be regular participants. Each person was asked to say out loud which line matched the one on the first card. On some trials, the actors gave the right answer, but on others, they gave the wrong answer. The test subject was always the last to respond. Sixteen sets of cards were shown, and the correct answer was always very clear.

Things went smoothly until the third round, when the first actor gave a wrong answer. It might have seemed funny, but then the second person gave the same wrong answer, and so did the third, fourth, and fifth. Suddenly, the test subject was in a tough spot. His eyes told him one thing, but five people saw something different.

Asch also set up a control group where the actors gave only correct answers, so there was no pressure to go along with the group. In these trials, the test subject gave the correct answer more than 99% of the time. But with the group where actors gave wrong answers, Asch found that almost 75% of the participants went along with the wrong answer at least once. They agreed with the group in about one-third of the 12 test trials.

Asch's experiments are often seen as proof of how powerful peer pressure can be. Many psychologists were surprised that so many college students gave in to the group. Since Asch's work in the 1950s, social psychologists have used his methods to keep studying how people follow the crowd. His findings, that people change their answers because they care about what others think, have been tested all over the world.

Sources

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