

Asch and Milgram Experiments

What Were the Asch Conformity Experiments?

In psychological terms, conformity refers to an individual's tendency to follow the unspoken rules or behaviors of the social group to which he or she belongs. Researchers have long been interested in the degree to which people follow or rebel against social norms. During the 1950s, psychologist Solomon Asch conducted a series of experiments designed to demonstrate the power of conformity in groups.

In Asch's experiments, students were told that they were participating in a 'vision test.' Unbeknownst to the subject, the other participants in the experiment were all confederates, or assistants of the experimenter. At first, the confederates answered the questions correctly, but eventually began providing incorrect answers.

Results of the Asch Conformity Experiments

Nearly 75 percent of the participants in the conformity experiments went along with the rest of the group at least one time. After combining the trials, the results indicated that participants conformed to the incorrect group answer approximately one-third of the time. In order to ensure that participants were able to accurately gauge the length of the lines, participants were asked to individually write down the correct match. According to these results, participants were very accurate in their line judgments, choosing the correct answer 98 percent of the time.

The experiments also looked at the effect that the number of people present in the group had on conformity. When just one other confederate was present, there was virtually no impact on participants' answers. The presence of two confederates had only a tiny effect. The level of conformity seen with three or more confederates was far more significant.

Asch also found that having one of the confederates give the correct answer while the rest of the confederates gave the incorrect answer dramatically lowered conformity. In this situation, just five to ten percent of the participants conformed to the rest of the group. Later studies have also supported this finding (Morris & Miller, 1975), suggesting that having social support is an important tool in combating conformity.

What Do the Results of the Asch Conformity Experiments Indicate?

At the conclusion of the experiments, participants were asked why they had gone along with the rest of the group. In most cases, the students stated that while they knew the rest of the group was wrong, they did not want to risk facing ridicule. A few of the participants suggested that they actually believed the other members of the group were correct in their answers.

These results suggest that conformity can be influenced both by a need to fit in and a belief that other people are smarter or better informed. Given the level of conformity seen in Asch's experiments, conformity can be even stronger in real-life situations where stimuli are more ambiguous or more difficult to judge.

Criticisms of the Asch Conformity Experiments

One of the major criticisms of Asch's conformity experiments centers on the reasons why participants choose to conform. According to some critics, individuals may have actually been motivated to avoid conflict, rather than an actual desire to conform to the rest of the group.

Another criticism is that the results of the experiment in the lab may not generalize to real-world situations. However, many social psychology experts believe that while real-world situations may not be as clear cut as they are in the lab, the actual social pressure to conform is probably much greater, which can dramatically increase conformist behaviors.

"The social psychology of this century reveals a major lesson: often it is not so much the kind of person a man is as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will act." –Stanley Milgram, 1974

If a person in a position of authority ordered you to deliver a 400-volt electrical shock to another person, would you follow orders? Most people would answer this question with an adamant no, but Yale University psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted a series of obedience experiments during the 1960s that demonstrated surprising results. These experiments offer a powerful and disturbing look into the power of authority and obedience.

Introduction to the Milgram Experiment

Milgram started his experiments in 1961, shortly after the trial of the World War II criminal Adolph Eichmann had begun. Eichmann's defense that he was simply following instructions when he ordered the deaths of millions of Jews roused Milgram's interest. In his 1974 book *Obedience to Authority*, Milgram posed the question, "Could it be that Eichmann and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders? Could we call them all accomplices?"

Method Used in the Milgram Experiment

The participants in the Milgram experiment were 40 men recruited using newspaper ads. In exchange for their participation, each person was paid \$4.50.

Milgram developed an intimidating shock generator, with shock levels starting at 30 volts and increasing in 15-volt increments all the way up to 450 volts. The many switches were labeled with terms including "slight shock," "moderate shock" and "danger: severe shock." The final two switches were labeled simply with an ominous "XXX."

Each participant took the role of a "teacher" who would then deliver a shock to the "student" every time an incorrect answer was produced. While the participant believed that he was delivering real shocks to the student, the student was actually a confederate in the experiment who was simply pretending to be shocked.

As the experiment progressed, the participant would hear the learner plead to be released or even complain about a heart condition. Once the 300-volt level had been reached, the learner banged on the wall and demanded to be released. Beyond this point, the learner became completely silent and refused to answer any more questions. The experimenter then instructed the participant to treat this silence as an incorrect response and deliver a further shock.

Most participants asked the experimenter whether they should continue. The experimenter issued a series of commands to prod the participant along:

"Please continue."

"The experiment requires that you continue."

"It is absolutely essential that you continue."

"You have no other choice, you must go on."

Results of the Milgram Experiment

The level of shock that the participant was willing to deliver was used as the measure of obedience. How far do you think that most participants were willing to go? When Milgram posed this question to a group of Yale University students, it was predicted that no more than 3 out of 100 participants would deliver the maximum shock. In reality, 65% of the participants in Milgram's study delivered the maximum shocks.

Of the 40 participants in the study, 26 delivered the maximum shocks while 14 stopped before reaching the highest levels. It is important to note that many of the subjects became

extremely agitated, distraught and angry at the experimenter. Yet they continued to follow orders all the way to the end.

Because of concerns about the amount of anxiety experienced by many of the participants, all subjects were debriefed at the end of the experiment to explain the procedures and the use of deception. However, many critics of the study have argued that many of the participants were still confused about the exact nature of the experiment. Milgram later surveyed the participants and found that 84% were glad to have participated, while only 1% regretted their involvement.

Discussion of the Milgram Experiment

While Milgram's research raised serious ethical questions about the use of human subjects in psychology experiments, his results have also been consistently replicated in further experiments. Thomas Blass (1999) reviewed further research on obedience and found that Milgram's findings hold true in other experiments.

Why did so many of the participants in this experiment perform a seemingly sadistic act on the instruction of an authority figure? According to Milgram, there are a number of situational factors that can explain such high levels of obedience:

The physical presence of an authority figure dramatically increased compliance.

The fact that the study was sponsored by Yale (a trusted and authoritative academic institution) led many participants to believe that the experiment must be safe.

The selection of teacher and learner status seemed random.

Participants assumed that the experimenter was a competent expert.

The shocks were said to be painful, not dangerous.

Later experiments conducted by Milgram indicated that the presence of rebellious peers dramatically reduced obedience levels. When other people refused to go along with the experimenters orders, 36 out of 40 participants refused to deliver the maximum shocks.

"Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority" (Milgram, 1974).

Milgram's experiment has become a classic in psychology, demonstrating the dangers of obedience. While this experiment suggests that situational variables have a stronger sway than personality factors in determining obedience, other psychologists argue that obedience is heavily influenced by both external and internal factors, such as personal beliefs and overall temperament.