

AQA specification: Social influence

- Explanations for conformity: informational social influence and normative social influence.

◆ Explanations for conformity

According to Deutsch and Gerard (1955), there are two main explanations of why individuals conform to the majority – *informational social influence* and *normative social influence*.

Informational social influence

- **Informational social influence (ISI)** is when a person conforms to the behaviour or opinion of the majority because they see others as a source of the correct information and use this to guide their personal decisions. This is likely to occur when the situation is ambiguous (unclear) and a person is unsure of the correct response. They will then look to others to lead their response, believing the majority to be correct. An example would be during a crisis when people often panic and are uncertain what to do; it is then natural to see how others are responding and follow their example. Another example would be when expert knowledge is required and we trust other people's judgment to be more correct. Therefore, ISI conformity is due to cognitive reasons rather than emotional reasons.

Example of informational social influence

One example would be a person who has started at a new job and the fire alarm goes off and the person watches his colleague's behaviour to see how he should behave.

A sad example is the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. Some people remained in the South Tower building, even after observing the first plane hitting the North Tower of the World Trade Centre. In this ambiguous situation, some people turned to their colleagues' behaviour (who remained in the building), as a reference point to guide their own behaviour; sadly, this may have cost them their lives.

ISI leads to a type of conformity called **internalisation**. This means a person genuinely believes that the views of the others are right, which results in a change in their behaviour or view in public, showing **public compliance**, and in private, showing **private acceptance**. One example would be joining a religious group because you believe their ideas are right.

Normative social influence

- **Normative social influence (NSI)** is when a person changes their behaviour/view to that of the majority (i.e. conforms), in order to be liked and accepted by the group and avoid the group's disapproval. Therefore, NSI is often due to emotional reasons rather than a cognitive (thinking about it) process. Although the individual may publicly change their behaviour/views (i.e. showing 'public conformity'), in private they may not agree. This type of conformity is also known as **compliance**.

Example of normative social influence

An example would be a teenage girl who conforms to deviant behaviour (e.g. shoplifting) with her friends, so she can fit in, but privately she knows this is wrong.

◆ Evaluation

For ISI

Strength

- ✓ **Research support for ISI.** A strength of this theory is that there is supporting research evidence for ISI. A classic study by Jenness (1932) investigated the effect on 101 American students. The aim was to investigate whether individual judgements of the number of jellybeans in a jar were influenced by group discussion. Jenness asked participants to estimate in private how many jellybeans were in a jar. He then grouped the participants and got them to discuss their estimates. After the discussion, the group estimates were created. Then, the participants made a second individual private estimate. Jenness found that private second estimates were closer to the group decision than the initial estimates. This showed that individual judgements were affected by the majority opinion, especially in an ambiguous situation, and thus people were more likely to conform due to ISI.

Weakness

- ✗ **Social identities can influence ISI.** A weakness of the ISI theory is it cannot be replicated reliably. Abrams et al. (1990) found that in an ambiguous situation, people are more likely to conform with others they feel they share a common social identity with, known as the 'in-group', compared to those they do not have things in common with, the 'out group'. Examples of in-groups would be friends, people of the same ethnicity, religion, work colleagues, or a badminton club. This produces an in-group bias (tendency to favour one's in-group over an out-group). As a result, people are more likely to conform by internalising the opinions and views of friends than those of a stranger. This shows that the processes that determine informational influence are much more complex, suggesting that ISI as an explanation is over-simplified.

For NSI

Strength

- ✓ **Research support for NSI.** The strength of this theory is supporting research evidence that people conform as a result of NSI. Asch (1956, see next exam notes for study) carried out an experiment that required a group of 7-9 American male participants, seated around a table, to look at three vertical lines (A, B and C) and judge them, by calling out which line was the same length as the 'standard line'. In each group, there was only one genuine participant (naive participant), the others were confederates, who knew about the study and were told to give a wrong answer. Asch found on average about 32% of the naive participants conformed to the incorrect majority answer (about one-third of them) and about 75% of the naive participants conformed at least once. The study showed that conformity displayed by individuals can be explained by NSI. Even in a situation where the answer is clearly obvious, people will yield to group pressure and conform to the majority view to avoid being ridiculed.

Weakness

- X Individual differences.** A limitation of NSI as an explanation for conformity is that it does not consider individual differences. For example, people who care more about being liked by others are known as nAffiliators and are more likely to be affected by NSI. McGhee and Teevan (1967) found that students who were assessed as nAffiliators were more likely to conform. The desire to be liked underlies conformity for some people more than others. This shows that NSI as an explanation does not cover the fact there are differences in people, which may influence why they conform.

Both ISI and NSI

Weakness

- X NSI and ISI work together.** A limitation of NSI and ISI as explanations for conformity is that this is an over-simplification. This is because these two explanations, NSI and ISI, work independently from each other - conformity is either due to NSI or ISI. However, some psychologists suggest that, in fact, the two work together in influencing levels of conformity. For example, in another experiment by Asch, conformity was reduced when there was a dissenter (a person who disagrees) in the group. It could be argued that this dissenter may have reduced the influence of NSI (by providing social support) or reduced the influence of ISI (because they were an alternative source of information). This shows that it is difficult to know when a person is subject to ISI or NSI.

Practice exam questions

1. Explain what is meant by informational social influence. **[3 marks]**
2. Explain what is meant by normative social influence. **[3 marks]**
3. Explain the difference between informational social influence and normative social influence. **[3 marks]**
4. Outline one study that has demonstrated informational social influence. **[5 marks]**
5. Outline one study that has demonstrated normative social influence. **[5 marks]**
6. Georgina and Tina met at work and have now become really good friends. Georgina finds that when they do meet up, a lot of the time they spend together is with Tina's friends smoking marijuana. They asked Georgina if she would like to join them. She agrees even though she does not like it.
7. Identify whether Georgina is demonstrating normative social influence or informational social influence. Justify your answer. **[3 marks]**
8. Outline and evaluate explanations of conformity. **[16 marks]**
9. Discuss what psychological research has told us about why people conform. **[16 marks]**

AQA specification: Social influence

- Variables affecting conformity including group size, unanimity and task difficulty as investigated by Asch.

◆ Introduction

In the 1950s, Solomon Asch carried out a number of experimental tests, which showed that people would deny the evidence of their own eyes and give the wrong answer to a task in order to conform with the majority group, even when that answer was unambiguous (the correct answer was obvious). Below is Asch's original classic study that investigated conformity.



AN 'EYE' ON THE STUDY

A study into normative social influence The line-judgement task (Asch, 1956)

Aim

- To see whether people's behaviour is influenced by the majority view even when the answer to an experimental task is unambiguous. Asch wanted to see if people conformed to the majority as a result of normative social influence.

Method/procedures

- The study involved a sample of 123 American male university students. In each test, a group of 7-9 students sat around a table in a classroom. The experimenter told them they would be taking part in a vision test (the cover story) by comparing the length of vertical lines.
- In each group, there was only one participant who was genuine, called the **naive participant**, all the others were **confederates** of the experimenter – they knew the true aim of the experiment and were told how to respond in the test. The genuine participant was led to believe that the other participants were also real.
- The task required the participants to look at two white cards. One card showed a single dark vertical line and the other card showed three dark vertical lines of different lengths, labelled A, B, and C (see Figure 1 below). The participants were asked to call out in turn, in the order they were seated, which of the three lines (A, B or C) was the same length as the 'standard line'. The correct answer was always obvious. The naive participant was seated last around the table and was the last, or second from last, to give his opinion.
- Each line test was called a 'trial' and there were 18 trials altogether. The confederates were instructed to give the correct answer on six of the 18 trials, called **neutral trials**, and to give the wrong answer on 12 of the trials, called **critical trials**.

Findings

- Asch found that in the 12 critical trials, the naive participants conformed to the incorrect answer 32% of the time. This means that in approximately four out of the 12 critical trials, each participant conformed to the wrong answer. This is significant; if we compare this against the neutral trials (with no confederates giving the wrong answer), the participants answered incorrectly 0.7% (less than 1%) of the time.

