

# Group Conformity Studies

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of group conformity, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Group Conformity
2. Solomon Asch Study
3. Stanley Milgram Research
4. Groupthink

## 1. GROUP CONFORMITY

**Group conformity** occurs when people change behaviors or beliefs to be more in line with the sentiments or practices of a group. You might think that as an individual, you're strong and don't conform to groups, but experiments have been conducted that reveal the extent to which humans in society overwhelmingly conform to groups.



### TERM TO KNOW

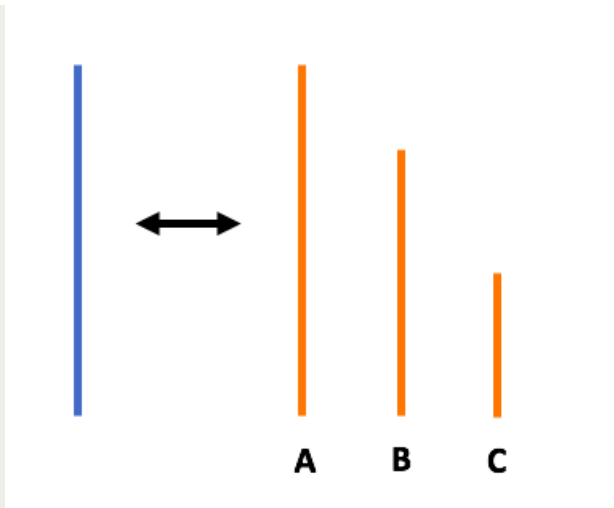
#### Group Conformity

Changing your behaviors or beliefs so that you are more in line with the sentiments and practices of a group.

## 2. SOLOMON ASCH STUDY

People can't truly survive on their own very well without groups, so groups are an important part of human society. American psychologist **Solomon Asch** conducted experiments that illustrated group conformity.

### IN CONTEXT



Look at the lines on the board: lines A, B and C. Which of these lines match the one on the left?

Clearly, line A matches the line on the left. What Solomon did, however, was to assemble a group of 6-8 students, and tell all of them except one to state that line B was the one to match the line on the left. Even though the one remaining student thought that the obvious answer was that line A matched the line on the left, all the other students said that it was line B.

What Solomon found when he did this experiment was that about one-third of those singled-out solo students uncomfortably agreed that line B matched the left-hand line, even though they could clearly see that the correct answer was line A. Yet one-third of them--because group sentiment was favoring line B as the answer, and they likely wanted to avoid conflict--went against their own good judgment and said that line B matched, when in reality it did not.

What is fascinating about this is that the **Solomon Asch study** showed that people were willing to compromise their judgments and senses of right and wrong under the influence of peer groups. Everybody could see that two of the lines matched, but under the peer group influence, they gave a different response, simply to avoid group conflict.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Solomon Asch Study

Study of social conformity involving visual perception from the 1950's where accomplices to the study answered incorrectly, putting pressure on the subjects to do so as well. Asch found that one-third of all subjects chose to conform by answering incorrectly.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Solomon Asch

American psychologist who studied social conformity in groups.

## 3. STANLEY MILGRAM RESEARCH

Solomon Asch's studies illustrated how people are willing to conform in peer groups, but what about

conforming to authority? Stanley Milgram, a student of Asch's, was interested in this question, so he devised some experiments to test how people conform to authority. **Stanley Milgram's research** involved conducting an experiment on punishment and how it is related to learning.



#### STEP BY STEP

1. Milgram assembled a group of males and assigned them one by one to the role of teacher. They were told that they would be teaching somebody else, and this other person--their 'student'-- was one of Milgram's accomplices who was going to be in the next room, hooked up to an electric chair. However, the student playing the role of teacher didn't know that the electric chair wasn't real.
2. The 'teacher' saw the accomplice of Milgram's go into the room and sit down in the electric chair. Paste was applied to the accomplice's hand where the electricity was supposed to shock him. Milgram told the students that this was to avoid causing irritation and burning. The teacher saw the accomplice have his arms strapped down so they wouldn't come undone when they were getting shocked. The teacher saw all this and assumed it was real.
3. In the room where the teacher would be doing the teaching, was a box. It was a shock box, and the teacher could administer shocks, in degrees of voltage. The teacher was asked to teach the accomplice sets of paired words--bird, fly; night, day, etc. When the accomplice gave an incorrect response, Milgram told the teacher to administer a shock. He instructed the teacher to increase these shocks by 15 watts each time the accomplice gave a wrong response, and so on.
4. Experiment participants did as they were instructed. The shock box was labeled to show that 15 watts was a mild shock, for instance, 120 watts was a medium shock, and upwards to 450 watts, which was an extreme, dangerous shock.

Even though the shock box was labeled clearly, so the teachers were aware of the effects, they implemented the shocks anyway, Milgram found. Around 120 watts, as the shocks increased, the teachers would hear first moans, then screams, and even banging on the wall. Approximately two-thirds of the teachers that Milgram recruited went all the way to the extreme, dangerous shock--startling results, because it proved that people will conform to authority. Instead of questioning the shock experiment, people simply did as instructed.



#### BIG IDEA

People conformed to authority to the degree that they would even go as far as harming another person, all in the name of following the instructions.

Milgram modified his experiment slightly and revisited it with groups of teachers. Each group contained three teachers, two of them being accomplices of Milgram's. He was interested in how the process of administering shocks would be affected by having more than one teacher in each group.

Each time, the teachers were to suggest a level to shock the person. The two decoys would suggest a shock level, which gradually increased, but since it was a group dynamic, it gave the third teacher--the non-decoy--the option to weigh in and suggest administering lower shocks than the higher levels that the decoys were suggesting.

Yet the non-decoy--the person actually being tested--still went ahead and shocked at the high level of wattage, as the decoys suggested. What Milgram found, then, was that in groups, people administered a shock voltage that was three to four times higher than the level they reached by deciding on their own. The group had a fascinating impact on the level to which a person would shock somebody else.



## BIG IDEA

These experiments revealed how people readily obey authority, even when the authority is telling them to do something that they might think is wrong.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Stanley Milgram Research

Series of research studies from the 1960's to determine how people respond to authority. The premise of the study was that subjects were told they were participating in a study of how punishment affects learning. The subjects were assigned the role of a teacher and told to administer shocks for incorrect responses. Almost two-thirds of the subjects administered shocks up to potentially deadly levels at the prompting of the researcher.

## 4. GROUPTHINK

The psychologist Irving Janis was one of the first to introduce the term groupthink. **Groupthink** is the tendency towards conformity within groups. It results in the group taking a narrow view of an issue, akin to tunnel vision. Rather than dealing with tension and conflict in a group, a group lets one idea emerge as dominant, even if individuals within the group might think otherwise. They don't want to have conflict, so they subdue their own dissensions with the dominant idea to avoid the conflict.



## THINK ABOUT IT

Have you ever felt in a group situation, that you've got something you'd like to say, but that it would cause conflict to go against the idea that emerged to become dominant and shared among the group? This is groupthink.



**EXAMPLE** A prominent public example of groupthink occurred during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, scholars argue. When the idea surfaced that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, everyone narrowed in on this idea, rather than the broader focus. People were seeking an actionable response after the events of 9/11, the idea that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction proved to be a convenient target. This was groupthink in action in society.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Janis' Groupthink

Irving Janis' advanced the idea that the tendency towards group conformity results in taking a narrow view of an issue, akin to "tunnel vision."



## SUMMARY

Today you learned about **group conformity**, illustrated through experiments like the **Solomon Asch study** and **Stanley Milgram research**. You also learned about the concept of **groupthink**.



## TERMS TO KNOW

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### **Solomon Asch Study**

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## PEOPLE TO KNOW

### **Solomon Asch**

American psychologist who studied social conformity in groups.