

Asch Conformity Experiments

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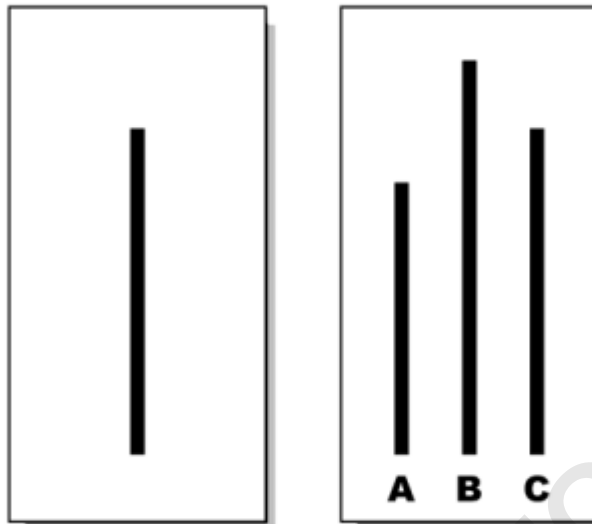
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The Asch conformity experiments were a series of studies published in the 1950s that demonstrated the power of conformity in groups. These are also known as the Asch Paradigm.

Introduction



One of the pairs of cards used in the experiment. The card on the left has the reference line and the one on the right shows the three comparison lines.

Experiments led by Solomon Asch of Swarthmore College asked groups of students to participate in a "vision test". In reality, all but one of the participants were confederates of the experimenter, and the study was really about how the remaining student would react to the confederates' behavior.

Method

In the basic Asch paradigm, the participants -- the real subjects and the confederates -- were all seated in a classroom. They were asked a variety of questions about the lines such as how long is A, compare the length of A to an everyday object, which line was longer than the other, which lines were the same length, etc. The group was told to announce their answers to each question out loud. The confederates always provided their answers before the study participant, and always gave the same answer as each other. They answered a few questions correctly but eventually began providing incorrect responses.

In a control group, with no pressure to conform to an erroneous view, only one subject out of 35 ever gave an incorrect answer. Solomon Asch hypothesized that the majority of people would not conform to something obviously wrong; however, when surrounded by individuals all voicing an incorrect answer, participants provided incorrect responses on a high proportion of the questions (32%). Seventy-five percent of the participants gave an incorrect answer to at least one question.

Results

Variations of the basic paradigm tested how many cohorts were necessary to induce conformity, examining the influence of just one cohorts and as many as fifteen cohorts. Results indicate that one cohorts has virtually no influence and two cohorts have only a small influence. When three or more cohorts are present, the tendency to conform is relatively stable.

The unanimity of the confederates has also been varied. When the confederates are not unanimous in their judgment, even if only one confederate voices a different opinion, participants are much more likely to resist the urge to conform than when the confederates all agree. This finding illuminates the power that even a small dissenting minority can have. Interestingly, this finding holds whether or not the dissenting confederate gives the correct answer. As long as the dissenting confederate gives an answer that is different from the majority, participants are more likely to give the correct answer.

One difference between the Asch conformity experiments and the Milgram experiment as carried out by Stanley Milgram (also famous in social psychology) is that the subjects of these studies attributed their performance to their own misjudgment and "poor eyesight", while those in the Milgram experiment blamed the experimenter in explaining their behavior. Conformity may be much less salient than authority pressure.