

Social Psychology – Conformity Questions

1. **What are the advantages to society when people conform?**

Conformity from members of a society is a form of control. It ensures activities are predictable, everyday events run smoothly and the members of society are safe. For example, traffic laws are there to protect us as individuals from injuring ourselves; if an individual chose to deviate from the social norm and drive the wrong way up a motorway lane, he or she would be putting lives at risk.

2. **What happened in Asch's Study?**

Solomon Asch (1956) conducted a classic experiment on conformity. 123 American male undergraduates were tested. Asch showed a series of lines (a "standard" line and three other lines) to participants seated around a table. All but one of the participants were confederates of the researcher. One by one, the participants were asked to select one line out of the three that was the same length as the "standard" line. The answer was obvious and definite. The confederates were instructed to give the same incorrect answer throughout, and the true participant was always the last or penultimate to answer. The aim was to see whether the true participant would conform to the masses and give an incorrect answer, when the correct answer was clear. The findings showed that nearly 37% of the responses made by the true participants were incorrect, i.e. conformed to the incorrect response given by the unanimous confederates. 75% conformed at least once.

3. **Under what circumstances are we more likely to conform?**

Conformity, or majority influence, is characterised by public compliance rather than private acceptance. This means that regardless of an individual's true feelings on a subject, they will conform to comply with the majority, not actually changing their private views. It has been shown that the probability we are likely to conform is directly proportional to the size of the majority influence. That is to say, the greater number against you, the more you are likely to conform. In addition, studies have shown that where there is a possibility of ridicule if an individual deviates, they are more likely to conform.

4. **How does age affect conformity?**

The older one becomes, more diverse are the life encounters experienced. To this end, older people are more likely to have strong views that have been built up over time on certain subjects. Conformity is therefore less likely with age. In addition, the desire to conform lessens with age as a truer sense of self develops.

5. **How do groups try to encourage conformity?**

Conformity is encouraged in groups with rewards and punishments. If an individual conforms and behaves in a way consistent with the other members of the group, rewards are given. If not, punishments are issued. This is an example of operant conditioning.

6. **Describe Milgram's experiments.**

Milgram (1963) recruited 40 male participants by advertising for volunteers to take part in a study of how punishment affects learning, to take place at Yale University. Everyone was paid \$4.50 and told they would receive this even if they quit during the study. There were two confederates: an experimenter and a learner (a 47-year-old accountant). The participant drew lots with the confederate and always ended up as the "teacher". He was told that he must administer increasingly strong electric shocks to the participant each time he got a question wrong. The machine was tested on the participant to show him that it worked. The learner (a confederate), sitting in another room, gave mainly wrong answers and received his (fake) electric shocks in silence until they reached 300 volts (very strong shock). At this point he pounded on the wall and then gave no response to the next question. He repeated this at 315 volts and then on said/did nothing. If the "teacher" (the true participant) asked to stop, the experimenter had a set of canned "prods" to repeat.

7. **What did Milgram find out?**

The main finding was that 65% of the participants continued to the maximum voltage, far beyond what was marked "Danger: severe shock". Only 5 participants (12.5%) stopped at 300 volts, the point when the learner first objected. These findings suggest that ordinary people are astonishingly obedient to an authoritative figure even when asked to behave in an inhumane manner.

8. **What was the phrase that made people carry on to the maximum voltage?**

If the participant asked to stop, the experimenter had a set of canned "prods" to repeat, such as saying "the experiment cannot continue unless you carry on" and "it is absolutely essential that you continue".

9. Describe Levy's study on dissent.

10. Under what conditions will people dissent?

11. Why is it difficult to dissent?

12. Under what conditions is dissent more likely to be successful?

13. Why do people conform?

An individual is said to conform if he or she chooses a course of action that is favoured by the majority of other group members or is considered socially acceptable. Therefore, an individual would choose to conform if he or she felt it advantageous. Conformity often has a negative connotation, therefore people usually conform to avoid confrontation or ridicule.

14. Describe different types of conformity.

- a) *Conformity:* A form of social influence that results from exposure to the majority position. It is the tendency for people to adopt the behaviour, attitudes and values of other members of a reference group.
- b) *Obedience:* A type of social influence referring to someone acting in response to a direct order from a figure of perceived authority. There is also the implication that the person receiving the order is to respond in a way that he or she would not otherwise have done without the order.
- c) *Minority influence:* People rejecting established norms of majority group members and moving to the position of the majority.