

Discuss psychological research into why people conform

One very influential and widely accepted account of group influence is Deutsch & Gerard's (1955) distinction between informational social influence (ISI) and normative social influence (NSI), known as the dual process dependency model of social influence.

Underlying ISI is the need to be right, to have an accurate perception of reality. So when we are uncertain or face an ambiguous situation, we look to others to help us perceive the stimulus situation accurately or define the situation. This involves a social comparison with other group members in order to reduce the uncertainty.

Sherif's (1935) study of conformity using the autokinetic effect involves an inherently ambiguous situation; there is no actual movement of the light and so there cannot be any right or wrong answers. Under these conditions, participants were only too willing to validate their own estimates by comparing them with those of others. The results were consistent with Sherif's social reality hypothesis, which states that 'The less one can rely on one's own direct perception and behavioural contact with the physical world, the more susceptible one should be to influence from others...' (Turner, 1991).

According to Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, people have a basic need to evaluate their ideas and attitudes and, in turn, to confirm that they are correct. This can provide a reassuring sense of control over one's world, and a satisfying sense of competence. In novel or ambiguous situations, social reality is defined by what others think and do. Significantly, Sherif's participants were relatively unaware of being influenced by the other judges.

Underlying NSI is the need to be accepted by other people and to make a favourable impression on them. We conform in order to gain social approval and avoid rejection – we agree with others because of their power to reward, punish, accept or reject us.

In Asch's classic study of conformity, most participants were sure about the correct answer. But they were faced with a conflict between two sources of information, which in unambiguous situations normally coincide, namely their own judgement and that of others. If they chose their own judgement, they risked rejection and ridicule by the majority. However, some participants were unaware of any conflict or of having given an incorrect response.

While the ISI/NSI distinction has proven very influential, like all distinctions it faces the problem of false dichotomy: are they really separate, opposite forms of influence? Insko *et al.* (1983) found evidence that they can operate together.

The dual process dependency model of social influence has been criticised because it underestimates the role of group 'belongingness'. One important feature of conformity is that a group influences us because, psychologically, we feel we belong to it. This is why a group's norms are relevant standards for our own attitudes and behaviour. The dual process dependency model emphasises the interpersonal aspects of conformity experiments, which could just as easily occur between individuals as group members.

The self-categorisation approach suggests that in Sherif's (1935) experiment, for example, participants assumed that the autokinetic effect was real, and expected to agree with each other. In support of this, it has been shown that when participants discover that the autokinetic effect is an illusion, mutual influence and convergence cease – the need to agree at all is removed (Sperling, 1946).

If, however, we believe that there is a correct answer, and we are uncertain what it is, then only those whom we categorise as belonging to the ingroup will influence our judgements. Abrams *et al.* (1990) replicated Sherif's experiment with psychology students, but manipulated categorisation: confederates were introduced as students at a nearby university, but were either fellow psychology students or students of ancient history. Convergence only occurred when others were categorised as being equivalent to self, that is, a member of the ingroup – fellow psychology students. So, self-categorisation may set limits on ISI. It should also set limits on NSI, since individuals will presumably have a stronger desire to receive rewards, approval and acceptance from those categorised in the same way as themselves than from those categorised differently. Using the Asch paradigm, but again manipulating categorisation, Abrams *et al.* found that conformity exceeded the usual level of 32 per cent in the ingroup condition, but was greatly below this level in the outgroup condition.

Abrams *et al.* (1990) argue that we only experience uncertainty when we disagree with those with whom we expect to agree. This is especially likely when we regard those others as members of the same category or group as ourselves with respect to judgements made in a shared stimulus situation. Social influence occurs, then, when we see ourselves as belonging to a group and possessing the same characteristics and reactions as other group members. Turner (1991) calls this kind of self-categorisation, in which group membership is relevant, referent social influence. The validation of physical reality and the avoidance of social disapproval are not as important as the upholding of a group norm: people are the source of information about the appropriate group norm.

Another way of trying to understand why people conform is to consider whether some people are more likely to conform than others and, if so, why. Crutchfield (1955) found that people who conform tend to be less intellectually effective, have less ego strength, less leadership ability, less mature social relationships, and feelings of inferiority. They also tend to be authoritarian, more submissive, narrow-minded and inhibited, and have relatively little insight into their own personalities compared with those who tend not to conform. However, consistency across situations is not high (McGuire, 1968), and the authoritarian personality (Adorno *et al.*, 1950) is perhaps as close to a 'conforming personality type' as can be found.

In general, men conform less than women. This is at least partly because men are traditionally more likely to see dissent or independence as a way of expressing their competence, while women tend to see co-operation and agreement with others as expressing competence (Zimbardo & Lippé, 1991). However, men with personal qualities and interests that are stereotypically 'feminine' conform as much as women with these same qualities and interests. Conversely, women and men with stereotypically 'masculine' qualities and interests conform less (Maslach *et al.*, 1987).