The line between conformity and resistance

Jolanda Jetten and Matthew J. Hornsey take another look at Solomon Asch’s famous line-judgement studies

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Mark Twain

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Friedrich Nietzsche

In most Western cultures, there is a prevalent notion that one should stand strong in the face of pressures to conform. Doing so is seen as an act of courage and personal strength, while going along with the majority is considered a sign of weakness – what cowards and weak-willed people do. Indeed, as the above two quotes indicate, some novelists and philosophers have argued that we should worry if we find ourselves in the majority: by definition, the individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe. If you try it, you will be lonely often, and sometimes frightened. But no price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself.

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Looking Back

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his neighbour seriously or smile sheepishly. He may suddenly stand up to look more closely at the card. At other times he may become especially quiet and immobile (Asch, 1952, p.454).

The background of the line-judgement studies

Asch’s interest in conformity began when he became aware of classic research on hypnosis and suggestion. In these studies, people are typically asked to give their opinion on a topic, after which they are confronted with an authority or group of people saying the opposite. When people are again asked for their opinion, they shift their views and attitudes and start to agree with the majority/authority. Asch and many others were puzzled by this finding: why would people change their mind when the authority or majority did not even present arguments to support their views? Conformity not only seemed the irrational thing to do, but also potentially dangerous: people could easily fall in the trap of conforming to others who are not only wrong, but might have evil intentions.

It was the latter danger that many ordinary Americans in the 1950s were most fearful of. With the horrors of WWII fresh in their minds, people had not forgotten the ease with which ordinary soldiers seemed to be capable of extreme atrocities because they were only doing what the majority was doing… just ‘following orders’. This fear of conformity was fuelled when, at the height of the Cold War, reports emerged that suggested that American prisoners of war were brainwashed by the communists – they denounced American capitalism and appeared to fully embrace the communist cause. It was particularly troubling that it did not appear to take all that much for these soldiers to take the side of their captors.

The impact of the studies

It is not difficult to understand why the Asch studies attracted so much attention. The findings bothered people because they suggest that people appeared to be going along with the majority in a sheep-like fashion. Asch-style conformity has been argued to underlie behaviours as diverse as war crimes, eating disorders, and football hooliganism. The Asch studies appear to show that individuals are unable to resist group pressure and that they become slaves of immediate influences. On a lighter note, the insights that emerged from Asch’s insights have been used to design all sorts of pranks. Best known are the elevator pranks whereby naive participants enter an elevator filled with confederates who all behave in a similar but illogical way. For example, in one prank, all confederates face the rear as soon as they enter an elevator. Very quickly the naive participants conform and turn to face the rear.

Moscovici commented in 1985 that: ‘the Asch studies are one of the most dramatic illustrations of conformity, of blindly going along with the group, even when the individual realizes that by doing so he turns his back on reality and truth (p.349). However, after closely engaging with Asch’s work, we wondered whether this is really the key point to take away from the studies (see Jetten & Horne, 2012). Do the data really show the prevalence of conformity? Is the behaviour that Asch’s participants show evidence of mindless and sheep-like behaviour? Or did people engage in sensible behaviour given the enormous conformity pressure they were facing? In what follows, we unpack these issues in greater detail.

Resistance

There is another way to interpret the results. In Asch’s own words, ‘about one quarter of the subjects were completely independent and never agreed with the erroneous judgement of the majority’ (Asch, 1955, p.33). It is also clear that only approximately 11 per cent of participants conformed on almost all trials. When looking at the results in this way, it appears that the studies do not just show evidence of conformity, they also provide evidence of significant levels of resistance and non-conformity. In fact, every one time participants conformed, they also dissented twice. In other words, participants were more likely to resist going along with the majority than to conform to it. Given this, it is ironic that the Asch line-judgement studies have become known as the ‘conformity studies’ when the dominant response appeared to be non-conformity and dissent.

The relatively high level of dissent found in Asch’s studies is particularly striking given that the paradigm was almost uniquely designed to elicit conformity. In the line-judgement task, the potential costs of standing out were immediate (i.e. ridicule or negative attention from other people in the room). In contrast, the cost of violating what you think to be true was minimal. It doesn’t matter whether you call out A or B because it doesn’t involve betraying a belief that is important to you. So in this case, an analysis of pros and cons would lean the participant toward conformity. Subsequent research has shown that if people find themselves in a minority on a social issue that is important to them – a social justice issue for example – then conformity is negligible, and in fact counter-conformity is more apparent (e.g. Hornsey et al., 2003).

It is also instructive to consider what it is that those who resisted conformity pressure said. Asch reports two types of responses. First, some resisted going along with the majority because they were confident of their own perceptions and being true to their own perceptions than about not fitting in.

The studies shed light on the conditions and experience of conformity, but also on the ability of people to go against the majority despite enormous pressure to conform. Indeed, Asch was just as much convinced of the vitality and
realness of independence as he was of the power of conformity. He states that we should be skeptical, however, of the supposition that the power of social pressure necessarily implies uncritical submission to it: Independence and the capacity to rise above group passion are also open to human beings (1955, p.32).

He finishes his article by saying: ‘anyone inclined to draw too pessimistic conclusions from this report would do to remind her/himself that the capacities for independence are not to be underestimated’.

**Blind conformity?**

We also asked the question of whether Asch’s findings really provide evidence that conformity is a reflection of ‘blind’ or passive responding. In this respect, it is revealing to read what participants said when asked after the study to elaborate on what informed their responses. Many of those who conformed spontaneously mentioned that they went along with the group because, even though they did not think the majority was right, they did not want to appear foolish or like the odd-one-out. Some mentioned they did not want ‘to spoil the study results’ (Asch, 1955, p.33) and believed they acted in everyone’s interest by not rocking the boat. Others believed that they themselves were victims of optical illusions, and that the majorly was actually right – simply because it was inconceivable that so many people could be wrong. They convinced themselves that ‘I must be wrong and they must be right’.

These accounts provide a number of important insights. In particular, it becomes clear that people were actively trying to make sense of the situation by developing different theories on why the majority was giving these obviously wrong responses. Accounts that people were blindly and passively following the majority do not do justice to what the experience must have been like. Participants did not sit back and let the majority overwhelm them. Rather, they engaged and actively tried to read the context in order to develop a strategy for how to resolve the disagreement between what they saw and the majority response.

The results also provide insights into how participants may have resolved this conflict. The majority of participants conformed on some trials and resisted conformity on other trials. It thus appears that most participants engaged both in conformity and in non-conformity. This is an interesting strategy because it allows participants to not only stay true to their own judgement, but also to signal to the others that one is mindful of the majority and does not desire to completely break their connection with them. Interestingly, this is a strategy that many people use intuitively when confronted with others that have a different opinion: before we put points of disagreement on the table, we highlight and explicitly acknowledge where we agree with the other.

Asch was certainly very aware of the power of the situation. He emphasises that, once we find ourselves in the midst of a group, we are not indifferent to it and individuals are concerned about what others around them think. To take note of what others say and do is the only sensible thing to do. He says:

The individual comes to experience a world that (s)he shares with others. (S)he perceives that the surroundings include him/her, as well as others, and that (s)he is in the same relation to the surroundings as others. (S)he notes that (S)he, as well as others, is converging upon the same object and responding to its identical properties. Joint action and mutual understanding require this relation of intelligibility and structural simplicity. In these terms, the ‘pull’ toward the group becomes understandable [Ash, 1952, p.484].

In other words, going along with the majority – even though you know they are wrong – is not necessarily a sign of ‘blind conformity’. Such conformity can actually be motivated by a very different concern: to show others that you are sensitive to their opinions, that you listen to them and, more generally, that you are interested in maintaining harmony within the group. Who hasn’t found themselves in meetings where one decided to not speak up or express dissent and to go along with the majority (even though they were so obviously wrong) just so the group harmony would be maintained? In Asch’s words, even if we find that people conform:

we should be skeptical...of the supposition that the power of social pressure necessarily implies uncritical submission to it. [1955, p.32]

**Putting dissent back on the agenda**

What is it, then, that we should conclude from Asch’s findings? We suggest that there are two points that emerge when engaging more closely with his studies and his work. The first conclusion is that there is a disconnect between the way Asch talked about his results and how his results have later been reported in social psychological textbooks. While textbooks and popular accounts present the line-judgment studies as providing evidence for the prevalence of conformity, Asch not only found more evidence for non-conformity than conformity, his findings also provide important (but often ignored) insight into dissent – of going against the majority despite enormous pressure. It seems timely to put the study of dissent back on the agenda and to engage more closely with these insights.

Second, the Asch studies have come to symbolise the often sheep-like nature of individuals. Reading his original reports of the studies, however, shows that there is so much more that is going on in these studies. Furthermore, Asch provides a much more nuanced view of what he aimed to do, and also what he felt the implications were of his work. It is not just rational to listen to what these other people have to say and at times to go along with them, it is sometimes the cleverest thing to do.

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