SOCIAL INFLUENCE:
CONFORMITY
IB SYLLABUS SAYS:

• Evaluate research on conformity to group norms.

• Discuss factors influencing conformity.

Textbook pages: 119-123
WHAT IS CONFORMITY?

• One of the key ways that a society or culture passes down its values and behaviors to its members is through an indirect form of social influence called conformity.

• Conformity is the tendency to adjust one’s thoughts, feelings, or behavior in ways that are in agreement with those of a particular individual or group, or with accepted standards about how a person should behave in specific situations (social norms).

• Often, the term “peer pressure” is used to describe the conformity seen in schools, but conformity occurs at all levels of society and is not always simply about the need to fit in with a group of friends at school.
ASCH’S (1951) STUDY OF CONFORMITY (MAJORITY INFLUENCE)

• A classic study of conformity was carried out by Asch (1951). In his study, he wanted to find out **(AIM)** to what extent a person would conform to an incorrect answer on a test if the response from the other members of the group was unanimous.

• **(PROCEDURE)** The participant entered a room where there were six people and the researcher. The men in the room were dressed like businessmen, in suits and ties. These men were part of the study, and they were playing a role unknown to the participant.

• They were **confederates**, which helped the researcher to deceive the participant. After the participant took his seat, the group was told that they were “going to take part in a psychological experiment on visual judgement”. They were then shown cards similar to the ones depicted here.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRh5gy09nNw&feature=&p=15F807237ACB6E85&index=0&playnext=1  (Asch video)
The participant was asked to select the line from the second card that matched the length of the line on the first card. There were 18 trials in total. In some of the trials, the difference in the lines was hardly noticeable, while in others it was very clear.

The confederates had been instructed to answer correctly for some of the trials, but to answer incorrectly for the majority of the trials. The goal was to see if the participant would conform to the wrong answers given by the confederates, even when it was very clear that this response was incorrect.
ASCH’S (1951) STUDY OF CONFORMITY
(MAJORITY INFLUENCE)

• **(FINDINGS)** About 75 per cent of the participants agreed with the confederates’ incorrect responses at least once during the trials.

• Asch found that a mean of 32 per cent of the participants agreed with incorrect responses in half or more of the trials. However, 24 per cent of the participants did not conform to any of the incorrect responses given by the confederates.
ASCH’S (1951) STUDY OF CONFORMITY
(MAJORITY INFLUENCE)

• During the debriefing after the experiment, Asch asked the participants how they felt about the experiment.

• All reported experiencing some degree of self-doubt about their answers. Those participants who conformed said that they knew their responses were incorrect, but they went along with the group because they did not want to ruin the experimenter’s results, and they did not want to appear to be against the group.

• (CONCLUSION) Some argue that this could also be explained in terms of “the need to belong”—the need to be part of the group is stronger than the desire to give the correct answer.
• This study is referred to as the Asch paradigm, and it has been replicated many times.

• Out of those replications and variations, psychologists have found that the following factors influence the likelihood to conform to the group.
GROUP SIZE:

- Asch (1955) found that with only one confederate, just 3 per cent of the participants conformed; with two confederates, the rate rose to 14 per cent; and with three confederates, it rose to 32 per cent. Larger groups did not increase the rate of conformity. In some cases, very large groups even decreased the level of conformity.
UNANIMITY:

- Conformity was most likely when all the confederates agreed (Asch 1956).

- If one of the confederates disagreed, even if it was also an incorrect answer, the participant was significantly less likely to conform.
Confidence:

- When individuals feel that they are more competent to make decisions with regard to a field of expertise, they are less likely to conform.

- Perrin and Spencer (1988) found that when they replicated Asch’s study with engineers and medical students, conformity rates were almost nil.
Self-esteem:

• Stang (1973) found that participants with high self-esteem were less likely to conform to incorrect responses.
An evaluation of “the Asch Paradigm”

- Though the Asch paradigm has been successfully replicated in many variations, it is still important to take a critical look at the methodology of the study.

- First, there is the question of artificiality and ecological validity.

- Do these experiments accurately predict how people will react in real-life situations? In the original experiment, both the task and the use of strangers make this situation somewhat atypical.

- Asch, however, argued that experiments are social situations in which participants feel like an outsider if they dissent.
An evaluation of “the Asch Paradigm”

• In addition, as with most experiments, there is a concern for demand characteristics—that is, participants may act in a way that they feel is required by the features of the experiment.
In the original study, culture could also have limited the validity of the study. Since only one culture was studied, and the group was not multicultural, the study is limited in its application.

Since culture is dynamic, it is possible that the Asch paradigm is no longer valid today, even if it were to be studied in the same cultural groups as the original study.
An evaluation of “the Asch Paradigm”

• **Ethical considerations** also need to be addressed. The participants were deceived, and they were made to feel anxiety about their performance.

• Today this would not be regarded as acceptable.
Finally, Friend et al. (1990) argue that there is a bias in the interpretation of the findings. In fact, Friend claims that it should be striking to us that in the face of unanimity so many people did not conform.

Perhaps the question should be which factors allow people to dissent, rather than which factors influence conformity.
• A different way of looking at the Asch paradigm

• Can a minority opinion sway the majority to change its views?

• Moscovici argues that when a minority maintains a consistent view, it is able to influence the majority.
Moscovici and Lage (1976)... 

- In a study carried out by Moscovici and Lage (1976), involving four participants and two confederates (6 total), the minority of two confederates described a slide with ‘blue-green’ color as ‘green’.

- They found that the minority was able to influence about 32 per cent of the participants to make at least one incorrect judgment about the color of slides they were shown.

- In addition, the participants continued to give their incorrect responses even after the two confederates had left the experiment.
How can minority opinions have such influence on the majority?

Hogg and Vaughan (1995) argue that some of the reasons for the influence of a minority group could be as follows.

1. *Dissenting opinions produce uncertainty and doubt.*

2. *Such opinions show that alternatives exist.*

3. *Consistency shows that there is a commitment to the alternative view.*
Throughout the 20th century, there have been several examples of minority commitment to a view not held by the majority—from women’s right to vote to civil rights movements.

It is through such consistency, for example, that the environmental movement has gradually moved majority opinion more towards conservation and protection of the environment.
Janis’s (1972) groupthink

- Research has shown that minority opinions are essential in a group’s decision-making process; otherwise, a group may experience what Irving Janis called **groupthink**.

- Groupthink is characterized by group members having a unanimous opinion on an issue, and they do not seek out alternative or dissenting opinions.

- Often, the group is blinded by optimism that their decisions will be successful. Members of the group come to doubt their own reservations and refrain from voicing any dissenting opinions.
Groupthink in the real world...

- A study group is an effective way to prepare for an exam, but only if the members take care to avoid groupthink.
- Groupthink is what happens when someone in a group suggests an idea, and everyone accepts the idea without considering other possible options.
- For example, when the group is unsure what the reasons for the First World War were, one individual may come up with what seems at the time to be a plausible answer. If no one takes the time to verify the answer with outside sources, and the group fails to brainstorm alternative answers, groupthink may occur.
- Teachers can tell when groupthink has happened because several students have the same incorrect answer on an exam, often with exactly the same wording.
You could also use Zimbardo SPE to show the power conformity to social norms of the “in group” (guards/prisoners)....
Quick quiz 1: Conformity

1. What is conformity?
2. Is conformity indirect or direct social influence?
3. What are the aims, procedures, findings & conclusions of Asch’s (1951) study?
4. How does Group Size, Unanimity, Confidence and Self Esteem influence conformity?
5. Make 6 different evaluative points that relate to the Asch Paradigm.
6. How does Zimbardo’s SPE relate to conformity?
7. What is minority influence?
8. What did Moscovici argue?
9. What were the aims, procures, findings and conclusions of Moscovici and Lange (1976) study?
10. According to Hogg & Vaughan (1995) what reasons are there for the minority influencing the group?
11. Give a real life example of the power of consistency by the minority.
12. What is groupthink?
13. Why are minority opinions important in relation to groupthink?
14. Give a real life example of “groupthink” that relates to your life.
Conformity: A summary of strengths and limitations

Conformity research has strengths:

1. Conformity research has time, observer, and space triangulation. These replications generally had results that were similar to Asch’s original findings when the studies used the Asch model with ambiguous information and in-group members as social influence.

Though many studies investigate conformity there are still limitations:

1. The impact of gender in conformity research is inconsistent. Some studies show that women conform more than men. Other experiments found that apparent gender differences were really attributable to lack of expertise on the tasks.

2. Asch’s conformity studies did not examine group processes; they looked at how an individual reacts to a group.

3. Ethical considerations are another limitation. Participants are deceived in conformity studies. Does the scientific benefit of the study outweigh the rights of participants? Under what circumstance can the researcher dispense with informed consent? Can the researchers keep participant performance confidential? The ethics of conformity studies remain controversial.
Why do people conform?

- Deutsch and Gerard (1955) argue that conformity is a result of **informational social influence** and **normative social influence**.

- **Informational** social influence is based on the way people cognitively process information about a situation.

- Festinger (1954) said that people evaluate their own opinions and ideas through **social comparison**—that is, by looking at what others do.
“Louise, everyone is wearing that this year don’t be such a sheep to fashion”
Festinger’s (1954) cognitive dissonance (informational social influence)

• When one notices that others are not behaving in the same way, or that they think differently, it causes anxiety.

• Festinger called this cognitive dissonance.

• If all of your friends like a certain type of music, and you do not, you may experience the odd feeling that you are not ‘with it’.
In order to get rid of this feeling, you may do one of two things.

1. First, you may begin to listen to the music and conform to the group’s opinion about it.

2. Second, you may rationalize your opinion, and develop confidence that your opinion is acceptable, even if it is not what the majority of the group thinks.
Normative social influence:

- The second reason people conform is because of normative social influence.
- This is based on our nature as social animals. People have a need to be accepted by others and to belong. (key principles of the LOA – connects to Asch Research)
- They may conform to avoid rejection and gain social approval. If being opposed to a certain kind of music means never being invited to social gatherings by friends, the choice to learn to like this music is based on the need for their friendship, and the need to belong to that group.
Cultural aspects of conformity:

- One of the most significant cultural differences is how people react to the word “conformity”.

- Studies show that not only do Asian cultures engage in more conforming behaviors than Americans do, but that they also value it to a greater degree.

- Americans, on the other hand, often see conformity as a negative trait, even though conformity is still part of being an American. One has to be careful not to divide the world’s cultures into an East versus West dichotomy.

- A study by Cashmore and Goodnow (1986) found that there was a high level of conformity among Italians. In a study by Burgos and Dias-Perez (1986), the researchers found that with regard to childrearing, Puerto Ricans valued conformity and obedience in their children.
Do cultural norms affect conformity?

- Smith and Bond (1993) carried out a review of 31 conformity studies and found that levels of conformity—that is, the percentage of incorrect responses—ranged from 14 per cent among Belgian students to 58 per cent among Indian teachers in Fiji, with an average of 31.2 per cent.

- Conformity was lower among participants from individualist cultures—that is, North America and north-west Europe (25.3 per cent)—than from collectivist cultures—that is, Africa, Asia, Oceania, and South America (37.1 per cent).

- Bond and Smith (1996) found that people who score high on Hoefstede’s collectivism scale conform more than people who score lower.
Cross cultural research into conformity (Berry, 1967)

- Berry (1967) used a variation of Asch’s conformity paradigm and found that the Temne people of Sierra Leone conformed significantly more than the Inuit people of Canada.

- He explained this in terms of differences in economic practices. The Temne people have to survive on a single crop that is harvested by all the people in the community.

- This requires cooperation and coordination of effort, and this is why Temne culture focuses strongly on consensus and agreement.

- Berry found that consensus is less strongly focused in Inuit culture because the Inuit economy is based on continual hunting and gathering on a relatively individual basis.
Numerous factors affect one’s conformity to social norms.

1. One is culture.

2. Another is the minority influence, an automatic response to in-groups and out-groups.

3. A factor related to minority opinion is when one consciously decides to conform because of in-group social identity (SIT).

4. Gender affects conformity, but only in some instances, such as when an audience is present. Gender differences are not seen in all situations when someone might conform.
Quick quiz 2: Conformity

1. What two reasons did Deutch & Gerard (1955) identify as reasons why people conform?


3. Why does the above behavior happen, and what effect does it have on people?

4. Give a real life example of cognitive dissonance

5. What two ways are there to get rid of cognitive dissonance?

6. Using an example of a research study, explain what normative social influence is

7. Explain the difference between Asian cultures (collectivist/interdependent) and American/Western cultures (individualist/independent) views of conformity.

8. Outline the findings of two studies into cross cultural differences in conformity.


10. Berry (1967) used a variation of Asch’s conformity paradigm and found that the Temne people of Sierra Leone conformed significantly more than the Inuit people of Canada. How did Berry (1967) explain his findings?

11. Look back at both sides of the sheet and identify as many factors as possible that influence conformity.