

A puzzling misinterpretation of the Asch 'conformity' study

RONALD FRIEND

State University of New York at Stony Brook

YVONNE RAFFERTY

Advocates for Children of New York

and DANA BRAMEL

State University of New York at Stony Brook

Abstract

In this article, we examine the interpretations by social psychologists of Asch's widely cited study of independence and conformity. Though it has become known as the 'Asch Conformity Study', Asch equally, if not more, intended and interpreted it as demonstrating the powers of independence.

The evidence for this analysis consists of 99 accounts in social psychology textbooks published between 1953, following the appearance of his study, and 1984. We asked whether these accounts were accurate, or whether, as we suspected, they minimized the role of independence and exaggerated that of conformity. We found that authors have often distorted Asch's findings, and that this trend has increased substantially with time: they have increasingly accentuated the role of conformity and underestimated that of independence.

We suggest several reasons for this distortion. For one, there has been insufficient care in reading the findings and drawing conclusions. Second, authors have generally limited themselves to reports of quantitative results. Although these were strong and beyond question, authors have usually neglected the intimately connected qualitative findings, which would have discouraged the misinterpretations. Third, the study of Asch was an integral part of his perspective on social psychology, which authors again ignored, thus encouraging a limited and out-of-context view of his study. We conclude with a thematic presentation of Asch's general theoretical framework, showing how it bears on independence and conformity.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the interpretations of a well-known investigation in social psychology, the set of studies by Solomon Asch (1951, 1952, 1955, 1956) of the effects of a unanimous majority upon the independence and conformity of individuals.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Ronald Friend, Department of Psychology, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, NY 11794-2500, USA.

0046-2772/90/010029-16\$08.00
© 1990 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Received 7 November 1988
Accepted 25 July 1989

That work has attracted much attention since its appearance in 1951, and it continues to be one of the most frequently cited in the literature today. It raises, we believe, questions of consequence, some of which we will examine below.

Our thesis is that the work of Asch has generally not been adequately interpreted, that despite the clarity of his account, frequently it was systematically misinterpreted, and that this trend has grown substantially over time. We will claim that many or most authors have missed the critical point of the issue Asch raised. When it first appeared, the Asch study was understood — correctly, we believe — as evidence of the impressive powers of independence in social life¹. With the passing years, however, it has been increasingly represented as a traditional demonstration of conformity and the central point of Asch's work has become not only drastically weakened, but reversed.

The object of this inquiry is to examine the published accounts of the Asch study, the interpretations that have been advanced of it, and to clarify the bearing of Asch's overall perspective of social relations on the problems of independence and conformity.

THE GUIDING THOUGHT OF ASCH

Ironically, many accounts of Asch's work draw from it the very assertions he was intending to refute. He concluded that he had convincingly demonstrated powers of independence under certain highly demanding conditions. What we find, though, is that most writers have portrayed his findings as evidence that individuals are predominantly weak in the face of the social pressures he studied. These portrayals have minimized or ignored what Asch particularly stressed and considered his major finding, namely, the capacity of most individuals to resist group pressure despite severe stress and doubt.

Who is right in this debate, or rather non-debate: the author of the studies of independence and conformity (conveniently and tellingly abbreviated as the "Asch conformity studies") or his numerous interpreters? An answer calls for an examination of Asch's views of independence and conformity. For evidence we rely on his *Social Psychology*, (Asch, 1952) recently republished in England (1987, Oxford U. Press).

This is not to say that Asch ignored or minimized the forces toward conformity or loss of independence. His studies show that he was fully mindful of these. Indeed, we consider it a strength of his work that he kept both of these poles of social processes in focus and strove to relate them. However, it has become a widespread, even fantastic misconception, that Asch was attempting to demonstrate the prevalence of conformity. Asch did not question the usual and long-standing demonstrations of conformity (e.g. Moore, 1921; Sherif, 1936). His own studies describe the varieties of conformity at least as extensively as those of independence.

Although he did not question the reality of conformity, he doubted that it dominated social life, and he did take issue with prevailing interpretations of it (personal

¹ To cite one example, consistent with the view that the study was as much about independence as conformity, is Crutchfield's (1955) characterization of the Asch study: 'his extremely important work of recent years on independence of individual judgment under group pressure' (p. 192). (See also, Harris, 1985.)

communication, see footnote 2²). What Asch questioned were the theoretical interpretations of conformity dominant at the time in social psychology and in related social disciplines (see e.g. Asch, 1948). Briefly, he took exception to what he considered intellectually easy-going and superficial ways of thinking about conformity. One may add that Asch's views on these issues grew out of his broader conception of human nature. He held that individuals are not as malleable or submissive as prevailing doctrines maintained and as supposedly confirmed in research. Referring to that work he wrote that 'one must question whether opinions are generally as watery as these studies indicate' (Asch, 1955, p. 32). Asch's earlier studies of the understanding of assertions (1938, 1940, 1948, 1952, Ch. 15) were conceptually closely linked to his critique of existing accounts of social influence. Thus, he argued and attempted to demonstrate that individuals do not, as a rule, accept assertions about socially significant matters uncritically or automatically. Rather, he claimed, the meaning of an assertion changes for individuals depending on its perceived relation to the source. It was the changed *meaning* of the 'stimulus' that was responsible for the changed interpretation, as for example, when a statement by Jefferson is attributed to Lenin. As Asch stated in 1948, such a change in evaluation is due to 'a change in the object of judgment, rather than in the judgment of the object' (p. 256).

Asch also took issue with narrowly based accounts of social influence that relied almost exclusively on highly ambiguous stimulus conditions that presumably accounted for the effects of majority and prestigious sources (e.g. that of Moore, 1921³). He called attention to the difficulties of deriving general conclusions from such studies. He stressed that 'concentration on conformity' in social psychology resulted in the neglect of the 'importance of the stimulus conditions': 'The concentration on conformity has appeared to confirm and to give special prominence to the thesis of the subjectivity of socially induced effects, and to obscure a range of other operations. The effects selected for examination have generally involved decreased sensitivity to perceived conditions. They appeared to show that one can manipulate judgments arbitrarily, in disregard of the given circumstances. The principal conclusion that psychologists have drawn in this region is that one can induce persons to believe as others do for no other reason than that they do so ... It is therefore remarkable how little is said in this area about the stimulus conditions or objects of judgment. To be sure, they are described, but they serve mainly as a point of departure for the induction of distortion. And indeed, the intent of investigation has been precisely to demonstrate that actual conditions play at best a secondary role, that between them and the person stands the group, which can freely impose its direction' (1961, pp. 150–151).

² 'I did not deny the far-reaching, even immense power of social forces to bend people in their direction. I did not question the powers of tyrannical regimes; their ability to induce people to cheat, lie, rob, torture, and kill—in general the vast effects of social conditions upon actions, beliefs, and sentiments. My point was a different one. The undeniable power of social conditions had received a particular interpretation in the earlier decades of this century in the U.S. that became a basis for questioning the powers of independence. Here was an error in thinking. Many concluded that high conformity implied low independence. My claim was that at a minimum the forces toward independence were no less strong than the forces toward conformity' (Asch, personal communication, June 19, 1989).

³ In the Moore study, for instance, judgments called for a choice of the less grammatical of two ungrammatical statements, and the selection of which of two dominant chords was the more consonant. Sherif had asked subjects to rank judgments which judges had previously declared did not differ from each other in quality (see Asch, 1952/1987, Ch. 14).

Asch deliberately reversed this mode of investigation. Specifically, he undertook to observe what happened under conditions that were clear and unambiguous. This change of direction radically altered the problems individuals faced in studies of social pressure. What was unique about Asch's particular study of 'independence and the lack of independence' (1956, p. 1) was that persons, perhaps for the first time in a psychological investigation, were faced with an unequivocally clear set of conditions. While providing an unmistakable alternative between independence and conformity, the unambiguous conditions also provided a basis for subjects to resist the group and remain independent. This focus on independence was one of the innovations Asch introduced into social psychology. As Asch (1956) stated: 'It is the presupposition of the present experiment that the stimulus conditions exert a fundamental effect on the character and course of the majority influence' (1956, p. 13). Thus, Asch's novel introduction of an unambiguous task (comparison of clearly visible lines varying in lengths) was not intended to demonstrate once again the power of a majority to exact conformity. On the contrary, the purpose of the unambiguous task was to allow individuals to use their insight which other artificial settings had suppressed or obfuscated.

Asch's overview of the issues was presented in his own text, *Social Psychology* (1952/1987): 'It is a matter of considerable import that there should have grown up in psychology a view that described social action generally in terms of passivity and equated group influence with arbitrary control. The model was an individual deprived of autonomy, one whose actions stemmed not from an inner direction but from external influences forcing themselves upon him and taking control away from him. The initiative belonged to an autocratic suggestor who was either a person in authority or a multitude of persons. The phenomena that were said to be central in social action were characterized by thoughtlessness and unreasonableness. In fact, it was the intent of the suggestion movement to describe social behavior as "irrational" in its roots and branches, as synonymous with manipulation. It became an accepted proposition that as a rule men can be induced to believe and act according to dictation and to hold opposed views with equal conviction' (pp. 400–401). And in the introductions to his studies, Asch repeatedly wrote that individuals were not merely blind or passive but that they had a capacity for independence, the ability to feel and think reasonably and critically. In the same vein he stated: 'Current thinking has stressed the power of social conditions to induce psychological changes arbitrarily. It has taken slavish submission to group forces as the general fact and has neglected or implicitly denied the capacities of men for independence, for rising under certain conditions above group passion and prejudice. Our present task is to observe directly the interaction between individuals and groups when the paramount issue is that of remaining independent or submitting to social pressure' (Asch, 1952/1987, p. 451).

Having established what Asch was trying to show, we turn now to his findings.

WHAT ASCH FOUND

Asch conducted studies (1951, 1956) in which groups of seven to nine individuals were instructed to match the length of a given line — the standard — with one of three other lines. One of the three lines was equal to the standard; the other

Table I. Distribution of errors in Asch (1956)*

Number of errors	Control group (<i>n</i> = 37)	Experimental groups			Total (<i>n</i> = 123)	%†
		I (<i>n</i> = 70)	II (<i>n</i> = 25)	III (<i>n</i> = 28)		
0	35	17	5	7	29	23.6
1	1	4	2	2	8	6.5
2	1	7	1	2	10	8.1
3		12	1	4	17	13.8
4		3	1	2	6	4.9
5		5	2	0	7	5.7
6		2	4	1	7	5.7
7		3	0	1	4	3.3
8		7	4	2	13	10.6
9		3	2	1	6	4.9
10		4	1	1	6	4.9
11		2	0	2	4	3.3
12		1	2	3	6	4.9
Mean	0.08	4.01	5.16	4.71	4.41	
Median	0.00	3.00	5.50	3.00	3.00	
Mean %	0.70	33.4	43.0	39.3	36.8	

* Asch (1956), Table 3, p. 10.

† Percentage of experimental group subjects who make corresponding number of errors; column added by authors.

two lengths differed clearly from the standard (and from each other). The majority was composed of 6–8 individuals who had previously met with the experimenter and were instructed to respond unanimously, in turn, with a particular wrong answer on 12 of the 18 comparisons (the 'critical' trials). In the group was one subject who was naive to this procedure. In this manner Asch created a situation that pitted a 'minority of one' against a unanimous and erring majority.

A total of 12 majority-induced errors per subject was possible. This was Asch's primary measure of yielding and independence. On the other six trials the confederates were instructed to announce correct judgments, to make the situation seem more credible. Asch first determined the proportion of yielding and independent responses across all subjects, and compared these findings with those of a control group of individuals who judged alone, and were not exposed to each others' judgments. Errors of the control group comprised less than 1 per cent of their total judgments.

He also examined the percentage of subjects who yielded or who remained independent. This second measure provided information about individual differences.

Asch found that approximately two-thirds (63.2 per cent) of the responses were independent or correct — that is, not distorted in the direction of the incorrect majority (see Table I); one-third (36.8 per cent) of the responses were yielding ones. In light of the later interpretations by the authors of social psychology textbooks it is interesting to cite the following representative statements by Asch of his own findings:

'Two-thirds of the responses were correct and independent of the majority trend; the remaining one-third were errors identical with those of the majority' (Asch, 1952, p. 457).

'The action of the majority distorted one-third of the reported estimates ... while the majority effect was considerable, it was by no means complete, or even the strongest force at work. The preponderance of estimates was, in each of the experimental groups, correct or independent of the majority, evidence that the given stimulus conditions — the facts that were being judged — were, under the circumstances, the most decisive' (Asch, 1956, p. 10).

'Despite the effect of the majority, the preponderance of estimates was, under the present conditions, independent of the majority. Individuals responded in fundamentally different ways to the opposition of the majority, ranging from complete independence to complete yielding' (Asch, 1956, p. 12).

Taking Asch's second measure, approximately 25 per cent of the subjects were always independent; in contrast, only 5 per cent went with the erroneous majority without exception⁴. That is, five times as many were consistently independent as were consistently yielding. There was substantial yielding, but independence was preponderant.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY TEXTBOOKS

The following analysis is based on 99 social psychology textbooks published in the U.S. between 1953 and 1984 (Rafferty and Friend, 1985). Among these were 36 revisions of earlier editions because they typically incorporated substantial changes. Eight of the textbooks were published between 1953 and 1964, 36 between 1965 and 1974, and 55 between 1975 and 1984. Overall, we are confident in having obtained nearly all social psychology books published between 1953 and mid-1984⁵. Two analyses were performed. One concerned the reporting of frequency of yielding and independent *judgments* averaged over subjects. The other assessed reporting of the proportion of conforming and independent *subjects*.

Frequency of judgments

Accounts of yielding and independent *judgments* were separated into five categories. In the first category were those which accurately reported the proportions of both independent and yielding judgments. A good example which describes both independence and yielding is found in Newcomb, Turner, and Converse (1965): 'Approximately one-third of all their judgments were errors identical with or in the direction of the planned errors of the majority. Since control groups showed virtually no errors in this situation, it was clear that the errors resulted primarily from the unani-

⁴ When the group's unanimity was broken and subjects made judgments after hearing another 'subject' disagree with the majority, the ability of the majority to induce erroneous judgments was decisively undermined. The frequency of errors in the direction of the majority dropped from 33 per cent to 5.5 per cent. There was a correspondingly dramatic increase in the proportion of independent subjects; 67 per cent of the subjects remained independent without exception in this 'partner' condition.

⁵ According to Gibson and Higbee (1980), there were 59 first edition social psychology textbooks published between 1953 and 1977. We obtained 54 (92 per cent) of these books and an additional 60 textbooks from three metropolitan New York university libraries and faculty offices. Of these 114, 15 were excluded from the analysis because seven did not mention Asch's study and eight were reprints of editions published prior to Asch's first research. A list of the books is available from the authors.

mous majority. At the same time, the influence of the majority was far from complete, since about two-thirds of all estimates were correct despite the majority verdict' (p. 239). Categories two and three grouped those authors who reported independence or yielding but not both. In the fourth and fifth categories, respectively, fell works that failed to mention frequencies and those that confused the two measures previously described.

Individual differences

The second analysis was about reports of proportions of *individuals* who yielded or were independent. Works that accurately described both yielders and independents are best exemplified in Klineberg (1954): 'Some of these critical subjects remained entirely independent of the group; at the other extreme there were some who agreed with the majority in every case' (p. 10).

A more recent accurate account is found in Back (1977), who after stating correctly that the predominant responses were independent, wrote that: 'About one-quarter of the subjects refused to conform; they disagreed with the majority on all 12 trials. Some individuals went with the majority most of the time' (p. 181).

In the second category only yielding was mentioned: 'Most persons placed in these circumstances felt great pressure to disregard their own perceptions and to conform to the rest of the group by choosing answers that seemed obviously wrong' (Secord and Backman, 1974, p. 304).

In the third category, only independence was mentioned: 'There were extreme individual differences among the naive subjects. About one-fourth rendered correct judgments on all the trials, despite the fact that they were in disagreement with every member of the group' (McGinnies, 1970, pp. 145–146).

The fourth and fifth categories, either did not mention individual differences or confused persons with frequency of judgments.

Content ratings were performed by the second author and reliability validated by having an assistant blind to the hypothesis re-assess every second book taken chronologically. Percentage agreement across rating criteria ranged from 82 per cent to 96 per cent.

WHAT ASCH WAS REPORTED TO HAVE FOUND

Frequency of judgments

The first analysis compares textbooks to determine how many mentioned frequency of errors and/or correct judgments. Table 2 shows that only 17 per cent made the point, as Asch had, that only one-third of the judgments were yielding and two-thirds were not⁶. Interestingly, only one writer (Zajonc, 1967) cited solely the per cent independent, but fully 57 per cent who mentioned the yielding figure omitted mentioning

⁶ That the method of reporting (33 per cent versus 33 per cent *and* 67 per cent) is not trivial in its implications is suggested by the following analysis. We looked at whether the choice between these two alternative ways of stating the basic results was associated with pointing out that 25 per cent of the subjects were unfailingly independent. Of the 57 per cent of works emphasizing yielding, only 37 per cent referred to this independent 25 per cent, whereas, of the 17 that mentioned both yielding and independent responses, 88 per cent mentioned this significant subgroup. Thus books which highlighted the conforming responses downplayed the 25 per cent of individuals who were always independent.

Table 2. Textbook reports of Asch's results on frequency of judgments

	Percentages of texts (<i>n</i> = 99)
1. Mentions 67% correct only	1.0
2. Mentions 33% errors and 67% correct	17.2
3. Mentions 33% errors only	56.6
4. Frequency of responses not mentioned	19.2
5. Frequency of responses confused with 'percentage of subjects who conform'	6.0
Total	100

the proportion independent! It seems that, for most authors, the yielding data are the most noteworthy. One typical example is Freedman, Carlsmith and Sears (1970): 'The results did not support Asch's prediction⁷. Even in this restricted situation, there was a great deal of conformity. Over many experiments and many trials within each experiment, subjects conformed on about 35 per cent of the trials. That is, about 35 per cent of the time they went against their own senses and gave the answer favored by the rest of the group' (p. 216)⁸.

Another notable example comes from Stotland and Canon (1972): 'This self-doubt, and its complement perception of the group as expert, may become so great that the individual may begin to conform to the group, to publicly state for example, that a line that is shorter than another is really the same length. In fact, Asch found that over 30 per cent of the subjects' answers were erroneous ones in agreement with the group! Interestingly enough, in subsequent studies on the same problem, the percentage appears to remain around 30 per cent! Furthermore, 58 per cent of the subjects made two or more conforming judgments in a series of trials' (p. 426).

These reports stand in stark contrast to those made by Asch, and that we cited earlier (see pp. 33–34).

A further result of interest is that Asch's main finding was most accurately reported during the early time period (1953–1964) followed by a steady decline (Figure 1). Over time there was a sharp increase in stress on conformity (e.g. highlighting only the frequency of yielding responses): while only 25 per cent of texts in the first period following the appearance of the studies overemphasized conformity, the values rose to 50 per cent and 65 per cent in the middle (1965–1974) and most recent period (1975–1984), respectively⁹.

Accounts of individual differences

Asch conducted extensive interviews with subjects, and on that basis reported in detail the different modes of yielding and independence. Though this was his primary reason for distinguishing 'yielders' from 'independent subjects', authors have often used 'the percentage who conform' to provide a quantitative index of the general

⁷ We know of no predictions made by Asch.

⁸ These authors stress 35 per cent conforming trials but neglect 65 per cent independent trials.

⁹ Since 36 of the 99 textbooks were revised editions, these trends could be accounted for by a proliferation of revised texts. However, a separate analysis which included only the 63 non-revised books produced almost identical results; 25, 48 and 64 per cent respectively of non-revised textbooks reported '33 per cent errors only', while 0, 21 and 18 per cent reported both '33 per cent errors and 67 per cent correct' figures.

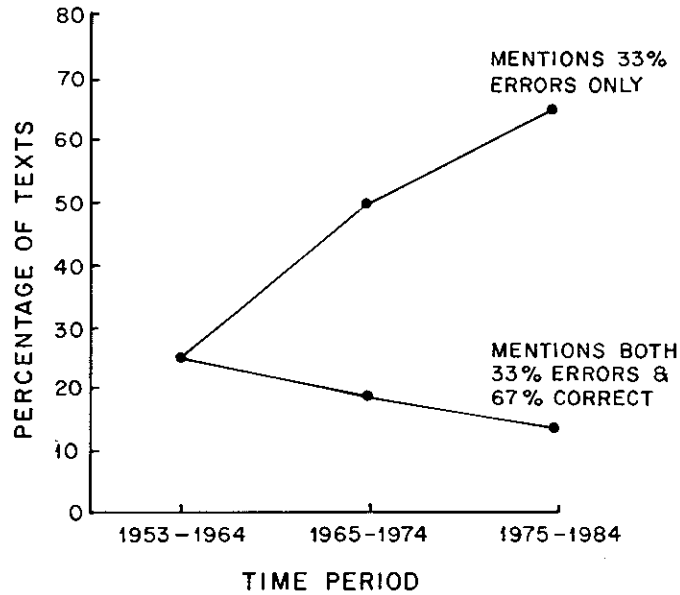


Figure 1. How social psychology textbooks in different time periods presented Asch's main finding concerning the reporting of frequency of errors (yielding) and correct (independent) judgments

amount or extent of conformity. The frequency of erroneous responses (33 per cent) is a relatively straightforward statistic, but 'the percentage of subjects who conform' can be quite ambiguous because it depends on the specific cutoff point one uses. Of his study of 123 subjects presented in Table 1, Asch (1956) wrote, that 'one-fourth of the experimental groups (24 per cent) gave errorless estimates, while an approximately equal number (27 per cent) gave majority-determined estimates from eight to twelve times' (p. 11). Table 3 shows that whereas 42 per cent of the textbooks emphasized the conforming subjects, only 5 per cent emphasized the independent ones. One-third of the authors gave equal emphasis to reports of the existence of both conforming and independent subjects, but then failed to point out that independent ones predominated. And 9 per cent presented no information about individual differences and another 9 per cent confused the concept of conformers with that of yielding judgments.

Only 38 of the works mentioned the specific figure of 25 per cent of the subjects who were consistently independent, a figure used by Asch to illustrate the hold of independence. A further 18 per cent of authors mentioned that 'some' subjects were consistently independent (see Figure 2, which totals all mentions of these independent subjects). This graph indicates a decline in the reporting of the independent subjects in the more recent period, a trend which is consistent with those reported earlier, in Figure 1, with regard to frequency of correct judgments.

Another frequently imprecise and oversimplified mode of representing Asch, which inflates the perception of conformity, has consisted of statements such as '75 per cent of the subjects conformed at least once' or 'the majority conformed at one time or another'. For example, Baron and Byrne (1977) state that '76 per cent made at least one error by going along with the group' (p. 258).

Table 3. Individual differences

	Percentages of texts (<i>n</i> = 99)
1. Main emphasis on the number of 'independent subjects'	5.0
2. Discussion of conforming and independent subjects without indication that independence predominates	34.3
3. Main emphasis on the number of 'conformers'	42.4
4. Individual differences not mentioned	9.1
5. Individual differences confused with frequency of responses	9.1
Total	99.9

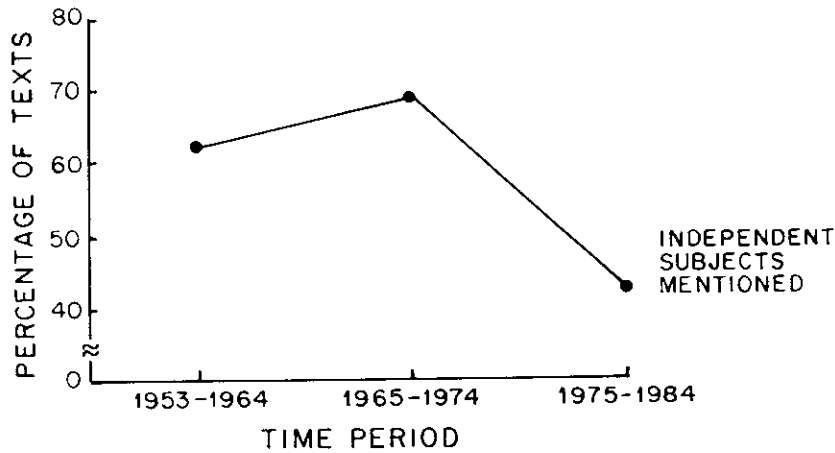


Figure 2. Percentage of textbooks in different time periods which mention the existence of totally independent subjects

What is more relevant and what the authors fail to mention is what Asch pointed out explicitly: that this was a situation of intense conflict for most, and that they were constantly struggling between the resolve to stay independent and the temptation to go with the majority. The above statements are particularly misleading because they include and label as conforming those subjects who were primarily independent — for example, the 35 of 123 subjects who were independent 9, 10 or 11 times out of 12. One could with equal justice report the obverse statistic, namely, that 95 per cent of the subjects were independent at least once; significantly, no authors did so. Of the 42 textbooks identified in Table 3 as emphasizing conformity, 29 made such conformity-inflating statements. Among these, the most frequent description was that '75 per cent conformed at least once'.

The individual difference results analysed over time are consistent with the trend found in reporting frequency of errors. Figure 3 shows that the percentage of texts emphasizing conformity increases with time, whereas the percentage that mention both yielding and independent subjects decreases (continuous lines).

Analysis of texts indicate that this trend is almost entirely accounted for by the

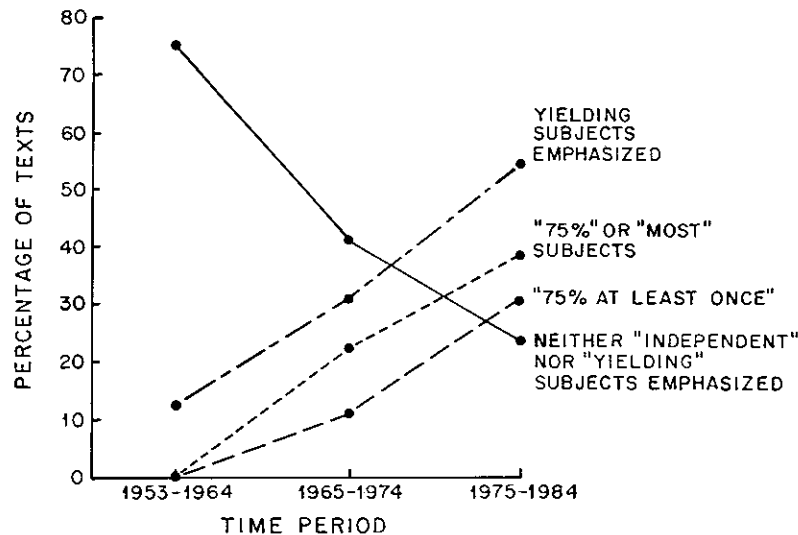


Figure 3. How individual differences were presented over time. The two lower dashed lines referring to textbooks which state '75 per cent conformed' are components of the 'yielding subjects emphasized' line.

increasing usage of the phrase '75 per cent of the subjects conformed at least once' (see dashed lines).

In short, the textbooks have frequently given very one-sided readings of the basic quantitative results, without pointing out how different was (and is) Asch's own interpretation — which, by the way, was also based on extensive post-experimental interviews with the participants. Although, we have not done a comparable analysis of references to Asch's work in non-text writings, it would be a mistake to assume that only the texts suffer from such inaccuracies. As a postscript, we offer the treatment given by Moscovici in the third edition (1985) of the *Handbook of Social Psychology*, where the author seems to misunderstand Asch's general theoretical framework, how it bears on independence and conformity, and, further, egregiously misinterprets Asch's findings: 'In the experiment named after him, Asch set out to show that if objective reality was in fact ascertainable, nobody would submit to majority pressure, and all persons would judge for themselves. Norms would therefore have a rational rather than a social basis. He was eager to invalidate the prestige-suggestion theory, moreover, by demonstrating that by giving individuals access to objective truths usually concealed from them, they would become impervious to group pressure. The scientist proposes, however, and reality disposes. As it turned out, when individuals were subjected to the influence of a group giving the same unanimous response about the length of lines, even in the face of an obvious but conflicting correct response, Asch found that these individuals were more inclined to believe what others said than the evidence of their visual perception. The criticisms he had raised against the prestige-suggestion theory thus failed to be validated. So, the Asch experiment exemplifies an experiment whose value lies in the fact that it falsified what it set out to verify and clearly invalidated his theory. It serves, on the contrary, as 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' (pp. 348–349).

INDEPENDENCE AND CONFORMITY IN THE CONTEXT OF ASCH'S SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Having established that the exaggerations of yielding in these reports are not due to Asch's own writings, we now examine the place in Asch's social psychology of his studies of independence and conformity. It is our contention that the excessive focus on conformity in readings of Asch's work has led to the neglect of important theoretical issues in his *general social psychology* which also underlie the studies in question. Our purpose, therefore, is to elucidate certain general processes in his social psychology and relate them to his study of independence and conformity. We find encouragement for this starting point given the recent interest in metatheory in social psychology and its connection to social influence, which noticeably relies on Asch's social psychology (e.g. Turner and Oakes, 1986).

Despite their importance neither social pressure nor conformity is at the centre of Asch's social psychology. Behind these and underpinning them he identified a more inclusive pattern of operations, of which social pressure and forces toward conformity are special expressions under particular conditions. These inclusive operations, briefly sketched below, form part of Asch's general social psychology (Asch, 1952/1987). Of note is that Asch's wider perspective conceives of the social medium as generally cooperative and productive of human development rather than as constraining and distorting. Thus, Asch's account, unlike Freud's, centred on fundamental positive effects that the social medium makes possible.

Most basic is Asch's account of a *social field*. This is in the first instance largely a phenomenal construct that encompasses the conditions and effects of mutually shared activities, beliefs, percepts, memories, expectations, feelings and sentiments of participants in a communal setting. Here are to be found, according to Asch, the sources of the most significant and diverse social processes and modes of discourse. Such mutuality constitutes a shared ground for participants in a community; hence he refers to it as 'a mutually shared field'. The latter is the foundation that members of a community take for granted. This field is at the core of Asch's account of all social psychological phenomena and forms the irreducible foundation of human experience and action.

Asch's treatment of the social field leads directly to an examination of its great product, *consensus*, and carries forward his analysis of human interaction. One principal theme is the analysis of similarities and differences between members of a social field. Similarities are the point of departure of profoundly important socio-psychological effects. Specifically, structural similarities between humans are the source of fundamental correspondences between their actions and experiences. In the main, what they bring into play is a consequence of 'a basic identity in the perception of frameworks' (Asch, *Ibid.*, p. 128). 'Not only do I see what others see; but also I perceive the same relations and structures in the surroundings that they perceive. When an object disappears from my view, it disappears for others as well; the hill that is further away for me is also further away for my neighbor; the earlier of a course of events is so for both of us; all see this object larger than that. In short,

the frameworks of space, time, and causality are perceived in essentially similar ways by all. There is a structural similarity between the perceptions of persons' (Asch, *Ibid.*, p. 128).

Asch adds that it is not similarity *per se* that is of consequence but rather its lawfulness and its incorporation into social action. 'Our individual experience reveals to each of us a world of structures, orderly happenings. Further observation shows us that others stand in the same relation to the surroundings as we do. This sets the ground for a sensible interaction between persons. If we were unable to come to agreement about the surroundings, sensible interaction would lack all foundation. To the extent that we do so and to the extent that we can make known our experiences, the relations of identity or similarity of our perceptions become the condition for mutual action. These facts become also the intelligible basis for relations of difference in our experiences. An object moves out of my field and into the field of another, and conversely. The other perceives what has eluded me and what I only later observe; similarly, I direct him toward what I already see. On the basis of the fundamental identity in our functioning we are able to derive the reasonable ground for differences based on differences in our positions and perspectives' (Asch, *Ibid.*, pp. 128–129).

Another axiom that grows out of these operations concerns 'the basic *psychological unity among men*. That the surroundings are equally accessible to you and to me is a fact not only about the surroundings; it is an important fact about each of us and about our mutual relations. This axiom is continuously confirmed; the operation of all psychological functions attests increasingly to its validity. Another person can help me to recall what I have forgotten, giving evidence that he is in touch with the same outer order of events. Even more important is the constantly validated fact that the perceptions of causality and inference work similarly in us. The same relations of cause and effect that are binding for me are binding for others; what appears problematic to me will often appear so for others. In short, we find that the same logic works in our thinking and directs our conclusions. No more than there is private space and time is there private logic' (p. 130).

Asch then points out that the axiom of unity is not limited to cognitive events. 'We discover a far-reaching unity in our emotional nature, a fact that might be mentioned before all others. The same events move us to laughter and tears, and what strikes terror in my neighbour does not as a rule leave me wholly cold. In short, in the course of social experience we discover a basic unity in our perceptions, motives, thoughts and purposes' (Asch, *Ibid.*, p. 130). At the same time 'the sense of the "subjectivity" of our impressions increases' (Asch, *Ibid.*, p. 130). Asch suggests that these experiences deepen the sense of unity and differences between persons. The general conclusion he draws is: 'By far the most important consequence is that the actions of men are drawn into a relation of mutual relevance, which further experience extends and deepens. The surroundings come to include a reference to other persons, as do one's own actions. Happenings cease to have a relation only to oneself. On this basis the other person's eyes and ears become auxiliary to mine, and conversely. On this basis we turn for confirmation to the thought of others and try to enlist sympathy for our aims and feelings. In this way we become part of a flow of events that is dramatically wider than what is embraced in our immediate here-and-now or in the succession of our individual activities' (*Ibid.*, p. 131).

Asch places particular weight on the productive role that conflict and disagreement can bring about: 'A dispute about a fact or an action, or even a quarrel, is basically

an appeal to a deeper-lying unity; it is intelligible only if each party can assume that the other is capable of overcoming a distorted view' (Asch, *Ibid.*, p. 131)¹⁰. He then draws a more general conclusion: 'the other is capable of arousing in me a doubt that would otherwise not occur to me. The clash of views generates events of far-reaching importance. I am induced to take up a particular standpoint, to view my own action as another views it or as the action of another person, and, conversely, to view another's action as my own. Now I have within me two standpoints, my own and that of the other; both are now part of my way of thinking. In this way the limitations of my individual thinking are transcended by including the thoughts of others. I am now open to more alternatives than my own unaided comprehension would make possible. Disagreements, when their causes are intelligible, can enrich and strengthen, rather than injure, our sense of objectivity' (Asch, *Ibid.*, pp. 131–132).

It is these deeply rooted assumptions — of mutually shared perceptions and expectations — which are decisively shattered by the unusual conditions encountered by the subjects in the study and which are revealed in their qualitative responses. Although the line judging task is itself simple, because the situation placed subjects at 'odds with a majority about a basic relation in the world', it took on a deeper and broader significance which touched on some fundamental psychosocial operations that we have described above. It accounts for the intensity of reactions and severe stresses and disturbances observed in conforming and independent subjects alike. As Asch states, 'One need only tamper with the logical relations of social experience here described to realize their full force and how powerfully we presuppose them' (Asch, *Ibid.*, pp. 132–133). In the experiment, subjects begin by assuming identity in their frameworks of perception. However, these are unexpectedly and dramatically undermined. As the experiment proceeds, the subjects find difficulty in discovering reasonable grounds for the apparent differences in their perceptions. Nor can they assume that the surroundings are equally accessible, since unbeknownst to them these have been tampered with. Thus Asch has created an unusual situation, one that Roger Brown called an 'epistemological nightmare' (Brown, 1965, p. 671), where the usual conditions of trust and mutually shared perceptions and action are missing. As Asch described it, an unusual 'hazard' was introduced in a situation where it was least expected and where 'consensus, especially on fundamental traits of the surroundings, is the vital prerequisite of social action; to abolish or to impair it is to threaten the relations of interdependence which ordinarily experience continuously validates' (Asch, 1956, p. 66).

What is indeed impressive is that independence nevertheless predominated despite the full force of the unanimous majority. This independence is itself a product of each individual's social experience, of perceptions that have been continuously validated by others in mutually shared social fields. It also attests to the importance of the stimulus conditions which provided subjects with the basis for withstanding the social pressure of the group. It was this novel feature, introduced by Asch as part of the experimental condition for theoretical reasons, which distinguished his investigation from previous ones on conformity. That research, he noted, disregarded the objects of judgment and subscribed to the thesis of arbitrariness and subjectivity in social influence; that 'between them and the person stands the group, which can

¹⁰The reader will note that this point bears directly on the studies of independence and conformity.

freely impose its direction' (Asch, 1961, p. 151). Accounts of the Asch study which over emphasize conformity and underestimate independence may not have given sufficient attention to the reasoning that underlies the study. That Asch found independence was at least an equal, if not a stronger force than conformity, supports his conclusion that 'The circumstance that decisively governed the course of the reactions was the introduction of *an unambiguous objective condition as the object of judgment*' (italics in original; Asch, 1956, p. 66). In sum, the universal axioms that form Asch's general epistemology also underpin specifically the findings of his study. Rather than disproving or contradicting himself, as some social psychologists have maintained, Asch's studies of independence and conformity correspond closely to his own general theory of social psychology and his critique of prestige-suggestion theory.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We have examined the treatment of Asch's ground-breaking investigation of independence and conformity in a large number of social psychology textbooks appearing in the U.S. between 1953 and 1984. This inquiry was prompted by the belief that Asch's 'conformity' study was not adequately understood. We found that most authors minimized the role of independence and exaggerated the powers of conformity, when, in fact, independence predominated. It should be noted that our findings about textbooks are limited to the interpretations of U.S. social psychologists. European social psychologists may be less prone to misrepresentation given their current interest in Asch's primary work as reflected by the recent reprinting of his *Social Psychology* (1987). One of our further aims has been to outline some of the fundamentals of Asch's perspective on social psychology. Asch has constructed a foundation for social psychology that views the social medium as predominantly cooperative and productive of human development — a perspective that is directly contrary to the way his work has been incorporated into social psychology in the U.S. The task of explaining why Asch's study of 'conformity' has been misinterpreted or, as Asch wrote some years later, why 'thinking and investigation have concentrated almost obsessively on conformity in its most sterile forms' (Asch, 1959, p. 382), still remains to be answered.

REFERENCES

- Asch, S. E. (1938). 'Studies in the principles of judgments and attitudes: I. Two basic principles of judgments', *The Journal of Psychology*, **5**: 210–251.
- Asch, S. E. (1940). 'Studies in the principles of judgments and attitudes: II. Determination of judgments by group and ego standards', *Journal of Social Psychology*, **12**: 433–465.
- Asch, S. E. (1948). 'The doctrine of suggestion, prestige and imitation in social psychology', *Psychological Review*, **55**: 250–276.
- Asch, S. E. (1951). 'Effects of group pressure upon the modification and distortion of judgments'. In: Guetzkow, H. (Ed.) *Groups, Leadership and Men*, Carnegie Press, Pittsburgh, pp. 177–190.
- Asch, S. E. (1952). *Social Psychology*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey. Reprinted (1987) in paper, with new preface, by Oxford University Press, Oxford, England.
- Asch, S. E. (1955). 'Opinions and social pressure', *Scientific American*, **193** (5): 31–35.
- Asch, S. E. (1956). 'Studies of independence and conformity: A minority of one against a unanimous majority', *Psychological Monographs*, **70** (9): (Whole No. 416).
- Asch, S. E. (1959). 'A perspective on social psychology'. In: Koch, S. (Ed.) *Psychology: A*

- Study of a Science*, Vol. 3, *Formulations of the Person and the Social Context*, McGraw-Hill, New York, pp. 363–383.
- Asch, S. E. (1961). 'Issues in the study of social influence on judgment'. In: Berg, I. A. and Bass, M. (Eds) *Conformity and Deviation*, Harper, New York, pp. 143–158.
- Back, K. W. (Ed.) (1977). *Social Psychology*, Wiley, New York.
- Baron, R. A. and Byrne, D. (1977). *Social Psychology: Understanding Human Interaction*, 2nd edn, Allyn & Bacon, Boston.
- Brown, R. (1965). *Social Psychology*, 1st edn, Free Press, New York.
- Crutchfield, R. (1955). 'Conformity and character', *American Psychologist*, **10**: 191–198.
- Freedman, J. L., Carlsmith, J. M. and Sears, D. O. (1970). *Social Psychology*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Gibson, G. L. and Higbee, K. L. (1980). 'A catalogue of social psychology textbooks', *Psychological Documents*, **10**: (Ms. No. 1933).
- Harris, P. R. (1985). 'Asch's data and the "Asch effect": A critical note', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, **24**: 229–230.
- Klineberg, O. (1954). *Social Psychology*, Holt, New York.
- McGinnies, E. (1970). *Social Behavior: A Functional Approach*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston.
- Moscovici, S. (1985). 'Social influence and conformity'. In: Lindzey, G. and Aronson, E. (Eds) *Handbook of Social Psychology*, 3rd edn, Vol. 2, Random House, pp. 347–412.
- Moore, H. T. (1921). 'The comparative influence of majority and expert opinion', *American Journal of Psychology*, **32**: 16–20.
- Newcomb, T., Turner, R. and Converse, P. E. (1965). *Social Psychology: The Study of Human Interaction*, Holt, New York.
- Rafferty, Y. and Friend, R. (1985). 'The Asch "Conformity" Study', *Eastern Psychological Association (U.S.) Proceedings and Abstracts*, **5b**: 20.
- Secord, P. and Backman, C. (1974). *Social Psychology*, 2nd edn, McGraw-Hill, New York.
- Sherif, M. (1936). *The Psychology of Social Norms*, Harper, New York.
- Stotland, E. and Canon, L. (1972). *Social Psychology: A Cognitive Approach*, Saunders, Philadelphia.
- Turner, J. C. and Oakes, P. J. (1986). 'The significance of the social identity concept for social psychology with reference to individualism, interactionism, and social influence', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, **25**: 237–252.
- Zajonc, R. B. (1966). *Social Psychology: An Experimental Approach*, Wadsworth, Belmont, CA.