## http://www.simplypsychology.org/sherif.jpgStudies of conformity (ISI) – Sherif (1935)

**Aim:** Sherif conducted an experiment with the aim of demonstrating that people conform to group norms when they are put in an ambiguous (i.e. unclear) situation.

**Method**: Sherif used a lab experiment to study conformity. He used the autokinetic effect – this is where a small spot of light (projected onto a screen) in a dark room will appear to move, even though it is still (i.e. it is a visual illusion).

It was discovered that when participants were individually tested their estimates on how far the light moved varied considerably (e.g. from 20cm to 80cm). The participants were then tested in groups of three. Sherif manipulated the composition of the group by putting together two people whose estimate of the light movement when alone was very similar, and one person whose estimate was very different. Each person in the group had to say aloud how far they thought the light had moved.

**Results**: Sherif found that over numerous estimates (trials) of the movement of light, the group converged to a common estimate. As the figure below shows: the person whose estimate of movement was greatly different to the other two in the group conformed to the view of the other two.

Sherif said that this showed that people would always tend to conform. Rather than make individual judgments they tend to come to a group agreement.

**Conclusion**: The results show that when in an ambiguous situation (such as the autokinetic effect), a person will look to others (who know more / better) for guidance (i.e. adopt the group norm). They want to do the right thing but may lack the appropriate information. Observing others can provide this information. People therefore conform due to informational social influence.

## Studies of conformity (NSI) – Asch (1951)



Asch believed that the main problem with **Sherif's (1935)** conformity experiment was that there was no correct answer to the ambiguous autokinetic experiment. How could we be sure that a person conformed when there was no correct answer? **Asch (1951)** devised an experiment whereby there was an obvious answer to a line judgement task. If the participant gave an incorrect answer it would be clear that this was due to group pressure.

**Aim**: Solomon Asch conducted an experiment to investigate the extent to which social pressure from a majority group could affect a person to conform.

**Procedure**: Asch used a lab experiment to study conformity. Using the line judgement task (see above), Asch put a naive participant in a room with seven confederates. The confederates had agreed in advance what their responses would be when presented with the line task. The real participant did not know this and was led to believe that the other seven participants were also real participants like themselves. Each person in the room had to state aloud which comparison line (A, B or C) was most like the target line. The answer was always obvious. The real participant sat at the end of the row and gave his or her answer last. In some trials, the seven confederates gave the wrong answer. There were 18 trials in total and the confederates gave the wrong answer on 12 trails. Asch was interested to see if the real participant would conform to the majority view.



**Results**: Asch measured the number of times each participant conformed to the majority view. On average, about one third (32%) of the participants in each trial went along and conformed to the clearly incorrect majority. Three quarters of the participants (75%) conformed on at least one trial.

**Conclusion**: Why did the participants conform so readily? When they were interviewed after the experiment, most of them said that they did not really believe their conforming answers, but had gone along with the group for fear of being ridiculed or thought "peculiar". A few of them said that they really did believe the group's answers were correct.

##### j0339724Evaluation of the Sherif and Asch studies

Both of these studies were carried out in similar environments with similar participants, meaning that they share many of the same strengths and limitations. Consider each of the following points in relation to both studies, ensuring that you explain your answers:

1. Can the results be applied to other settings? Do they have **ecological validity**?
2. Can the results be applied to other populations? Do they have **population validity**?
3. Did they both produce similar results? Are they **reliable**?
4. Both studies aim to test conformity; do they achieve this? Are they **internally valid**? Remember that the main threats to internal validity are **demand characteristics** and **extraneous variables**.
5. Both studies have been accused of being **unethical**. Explain what aspects of the study might have broken the following ethical guidelines:
	* Deception:
	* Informed consent:
	* Right to withdraw:
	* Protection of participants:
6. Both studies are quite old. Could they be ‘**era dependent**?’ If so, how might this affect the results?