

**Ethical Parameters of the Past: Does Asch's 1955 Conformity Experiment Conform to
Today's
Ethical Standards**

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In 1955, Asch performed a landmark experiment which examined how group pressure can influence the opinions of an individual, pushing the individual to conform to the group's perception. Although deception is used in this study, the procedures of the study and the treatment of the subjects-elaborated on in the following paragraph- falls well within the ethical standards imposed upon current experiments. However, there is some room for improvement in this particular study which could further the understanding of which conditions encourage or discourage conformity.

The first study conducted contained seven to nine college men, from three college institutions, in an experimental group to identify the approximate length of a line (Asch, 1955). Out of the seven to nine subjects, all but one of the participants were confederates of the experimenter; only one subject was being evaluated (Asch, 1955). The true nature of the Asch's 1955 experiment was to determine if agreement between the majority of the "participants", ie the confederates, on the length of the line could impact the answer of the test subject, indicating conformity.

The independent variable in Asch's 1955 study was the response of the confederates and the dependent variable was the subject's response to the same question. The operational definition of conformity was the assent of the subject with the group majority (Asch, 1955). The results showed that out of 123 subjects, 18 trials for each subject, the subject conformed to the majority 36.8 percent of the time, showing the far reaching impact of conformity within a group majority (Asch, 1955).

The deception experienced by the test subjects in this study is vital, because if the subjects knew the others in the group were intentionally misleading them, they would be more independent thinkers, guarding themselves against the pull of conformity. Furthermore, the deception was exposed and discussed during a debriefing, answering any questions the subjects may have had concerning the experiment (Ash, 1955). However, what would be interesting to change is the demographic of the subjects. It would be compelling to compare developmental levels (ie differences between children, adolescents, and adults) to determine if conformity happens uniformly across developmental levels or if there are any other patterns to be seen. Also, focusing on possible gender differences, different ethnicities, and varying socioeconomic backgrounds could show differences in cross cultural data. Finally, in the 1955 Asch experiment, there was a note saying some subjects conformed because they did not want to skew the data, showing a participation bias. A way to adjust this issue would be to have the group be partitioned off from one another, answer the length questions, come together as a group to discuss their results before handing in their answers, and through the discussion see if the subject holds steadfast to their answers or conforms with the group, reducing the chance of participation bias.

Reference

Asch, S.E. (1955). Opinions and social pressure. *Scientific American*, 193, 17-26.