Your notes

GCSE Psychology: revision notes

Conformity and obedience

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Conformity

- **Conformity** is changing behaviour or beliefs to fit in with a group.
- Asch (1951) asked participants to match line lengths in a group of **confederates** who sometimes gave wrong answers. On these critical trials, participants conformed about a third of the time, and about three quarters conformed at least once.
- **Situational factors**: group size, anonymity (**conformity** is lower when answers are private) and task difficulty (**conformity** rises when the task is harder).
- **Dispositional factors**: personality, such as low self-esteem, and expertise (experts conform less).

Obedience

- **Obedience** is following orders from an authority figure.
- Milgram's (1963) study: participants were told to give "electric shocks" to a learner (a **confederate**). 65% went all the way to the highest level, 450 volts.
- Milgram's agency theory: people obey when they are in an **agentic state**, seeing themselves as acting for the authority, rather than an **autonomous state**, where they feel responsible.
- **Situational factors** include the proximity of the authority, the location, and uniform: Bickman found people were more likely to obey someone dressed as a guard.
- **Dispositional factors**: Adorno suggested people with an **authoritarian personality**, often from strict upbringings, are more obedient.

Evaluating the studies

- Asch and Milgram used deception, raising ethical issues, and their lab tasks were artificial.
- Their findings have been important in explaining real-life behaviour.

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Key terms

Conformity	Changing behaviour or beliefs to fit in with a group.
Obedience	Following orders from an authority figure.
Confederate	A person who pretends to be a participant but is part of the study.
Agentic state	Seeing oneself as acting on behalf of an authority.
Autonomous state	Feeling responsible for one's own actions.
Authoritarian personality	A personality type that is very obedient to authority.
Situational factor	A feature of the situation that affects behaviour.
Dispositional factor	A feature of the person that affects behaviour.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. What is conformity?
2. What task did Asch use?
3. Roughly how often did Asch's participants conform on the critical trials?
4. What percentage of Milgram's participants went to 450 volts?
5. What is the agentic state?
6. What did Bickman find?
7. Who proposed the authoritarian personality?
8. How does task difficulty affect conformity?

Answers

1. Changing behaviour or beliefs to fit in with a group
2. Judging the lengths of lines
3. About a third of the time
4. 65%
5. Seeing oneself as acting on behalf of an authority
6. People were more likely to obey someone in a guard's uniform
7. Adorno
8. Conformity rises when the task is harder

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 4 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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