Asch Experiment

Procedure: Asch (1951, 1955) tested conformity by showing participants two large white cards at a time. On one card was a ‘standard line’ and on the other card were three ‘comparison lines’ of various lengths, but one matched the ‘standard line’ when the other two were clearly wrong.

The participants were 123 American male undergraduates. Each naïve participant was tested individually with a group of between 6 and 8 confederates. The naïve participant was not aware that the others were confederates.

On the first few trials all of the confederates gave the right answers but then they started making errors. All of the confederates were instructed to give the same wrong answer. Altogether each participant took part in 18 trials and on 12 ‘critical trials’ the confederates gave the wrong answer. A trial was one occasion identifying the length of a ‘standard line’.

Findings: The naïve participant gave a wrong answer 36.8% of the time. Overall 25% of the participants did not conform on any of the trials. 75% of the participants conformed at least once. The term Asch effect has been used to describe this result – the extent to which the participants conform even when the situation is unambiguous.

Asch’s variations:
Group size – with 3 confederates he found that conformity to the wrong answer rose to 31.8%, but the addition of other confederates made little difference. This suggests that a small majority is not sufficient for influence to be exerted but, at the other extreme, there is no need for a majority of more than three.

Unanimity – the presence of another non-conforming person (who was really a confederate) who sometimes gave the right answer and sometimes the wrong answer meant that conformity was reduced by a quarter from the level it was when the majority was unanimous. The participant acted more independently in general.

Task difficulty – he made the task more difficult by making the stimulus line and the comparison lines more similar in length. Conformity increased under these conditions. ISI plays a greater influence when the task gets harder.

Ethical issues are at play because the participants were deceived, they didn’t know the other people involved were confederates. But there are benefits gained by the study.