

## Evaluation of Asch's Line Test

One limitation of the study is that it used a biased sample. All the participants were male students who all belonged to the same age group. This means that the study lacks population validity and that the results cannot be generalized to females or older groups of people.

Another problem is that the experiment used an artificial task to measure conformity - judging line lengths. How often are we faced with making a judgment like the one Asch used, where the answer is plain to see? This means that the study has low ecological validity and the results cannot be generalized to other real-life situations of conformity. Asch replied that he wanted to investigate a situation where the participants could be in no doubt what the correct answer was. In so doing he could explore the true limits of social influence.

Some critics thought the high levels of conformity found by Asch were a reflection of American, 1950's culture and told us more about the historical and cultural climate of the USA in the 1950's than they do about the phenomena of conformity.

In the 1950's America was very conservative, involved in an anti-communist witch-hunt (which became known as McCarthyism) against anyone who was thought to hold sympathetic left-wing views. Conformity to American values was expected. Support for this comes from studies in the 1970s and 1980s that show lower conformity rates (e.g., Perrin & Spencer, 1980).

Perrin and Spencer (1980) suggested that the Asch effect was a "child of its time." They carried out an exact replication of the original Asch experiment using engineering, mathematics and chemistry students as subjects. They found that on only one out of 396 trials did an observer join the erroneous majority. They argue that a cultural change has taken place in the value placed on conformity and obedience and in the position of students. In America in the 1950s students were unobtrusive members of society whereas now they occupy a free questioning role.

However, one problem in comparing this study with Asch is that very different types of participants are used. Perrin & Spencer used science and engineering students who might be expected to be more independent by training when it came to making perceptual judgments.

Finally, there are **ethical issues**: participants were not protected from psychological stress which may occur if they disagreed with the majority. Evidence that participants in Asch-type situations are highly emotional was obtained by Back et al. (1963) who found that participants in the Asch situation had greatly increased levels of autonomic arousal. This finding also suggests that

they were in a conflict situation, finding it hard to decide whether to report what they saw or to conform to the opinion of others.

Asch also deceived the student volunteers claiming they were taking part in a 'vision' test; the real purpose was to see how the 'naive' participant would react to the behavior of the confederates. However, deception was necessary to produce valid results.