

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Opinions and Social Pressure

Asch, S. (1955). "Opinions and Social Pressure." Scientific American 193 (5): 31 - 35.

Key Words: Social pressure, peer pressure, group think, peers

Summary/Conclusions

The present article summarizes a series of experiments that examined the effect of group pressure on an individual's decision to conform or disagree with a majority. The first experiment examined the actions of 123 college students from three different colleges and discovered 36.8% of the time individuals would conform and select an incorrect answer when a group stated an incorrect answer. In follow-up studies, researchers discovered that variables such as group size and being joined by a dissenter influenced the rate of agreement in participants.

Limitations of Information

The current study is from the 1950s. It is possible that societal and behavioral norms do have evolved. While individuals may have agreed with a group in the experiment, it is possible that in a different context individuals would not be as easily pressured into incorrect answers. The consequences of agreeing with wrong answers in the study was minimal. The study participants were college aged males, it is unclear if changes in study demographics would have produced similar results.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Factors that Influence Group Pressure

The present study, completed in the 1950s, examined the factors surrounding pressure to conform for individuals in group settings. While previous studies identified that individuals are susceptible to influence, the surrounding factors were still unknown. In this study, researchers conducted a series of experiments to analyze the factors surrounding social pressure and conformity.

In the first experiment, a research participant would join a group of seven to nine actors in a room. The group was asked to participate in a matching game. The actors in the experiment, as a group, either selected a correct or incorrect answer. The lone research participant could either conform to the wrong answer of the group or act independently and select the correct answer. This process was completed 18 times for each of the 123 participants.

Participants selected incorrect answers 36.8% of the time. Only a quarter (25%) of the participants disagreed with the group consensus on all the trials. To test other factors with group pressure, researchers completed similar experiments altering the size of the group and adding dissenting views. The size of the group conformity had an impact on individuals. Researchers learned that when an individual faced three individuals, he or she would provide an incorrect answer 31.8% of the time. Adding more than three individuals did not substantially impact the pressure. Finally, when a dissenter is added, the group pressure effect begins to diminish. Individu-

als are more likely to join a dissenter in also selecting an incorrect answer or join a dissenter in selecting a correct answer. When the dissenter selects the correct answer, incorrect answers dropped to only 9%.

Practical Applications for Probation Officers:

- ✓ Ask probationers how many peers they spend time with when in groups. It might be possible that while probationers have a few anti-social friends or acquaintances, they might spend time in larger negative peer groups.
- ✓ Find ways for individuals to develop new prosocial relationships.
- ✓ When individuals explore anti-social thoughts or beliefs, it may be beneficial to encourage them to ask others about their opinions.
- ✓ Practice managing anti-social statements in preparation for probation appointments.

Practical Applications for the Workplace:

- ✓ Remember that social pressure may create situations where behaviors occur because individuals feel pressure to conform to social opinions and practices of colleagues.
- ✓ If a group appears to form a consensus, try taking a dissenting view. This may encourage individuals that don't agree to be more vocal about opposing views.