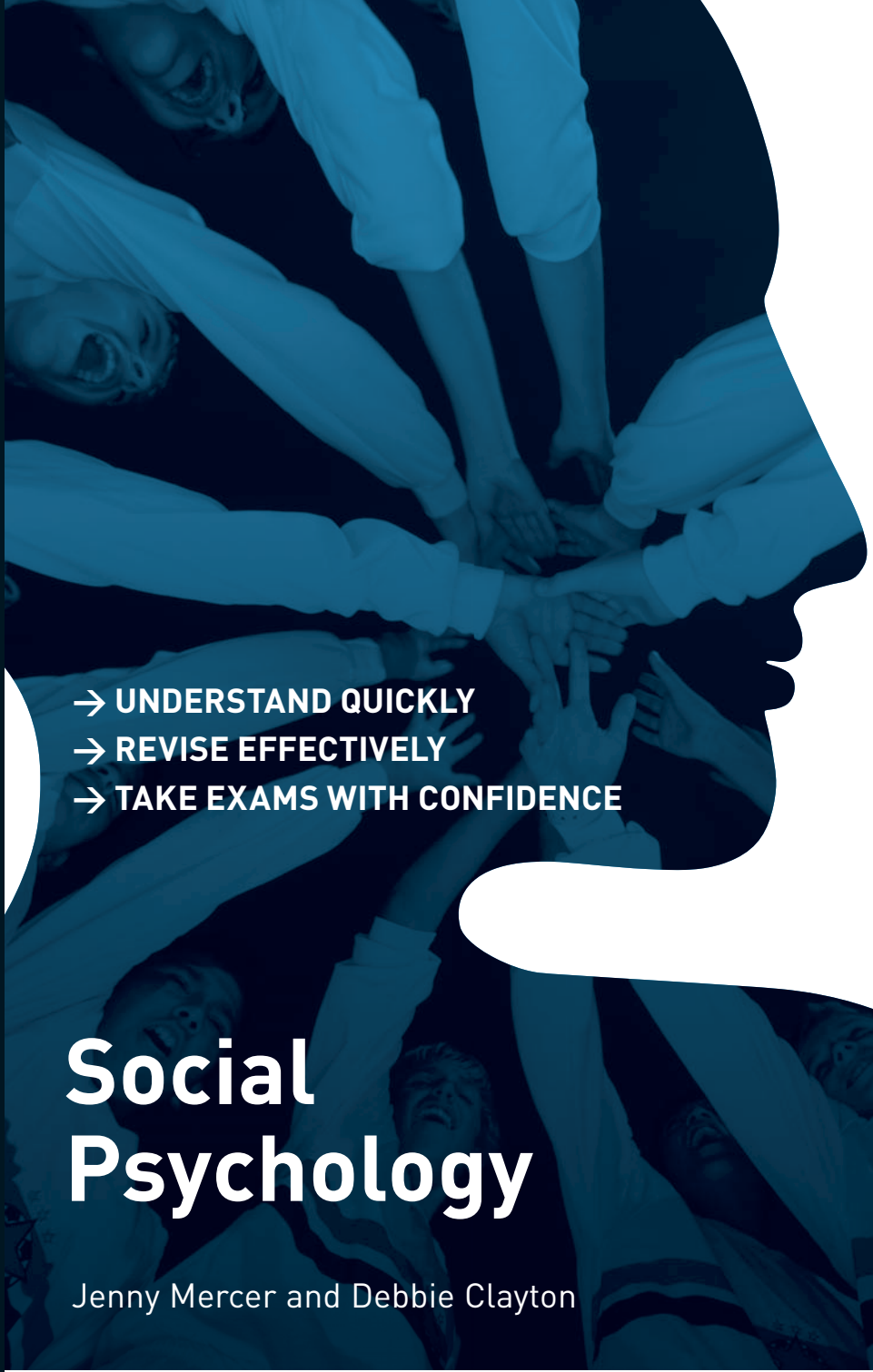

Psychology Express

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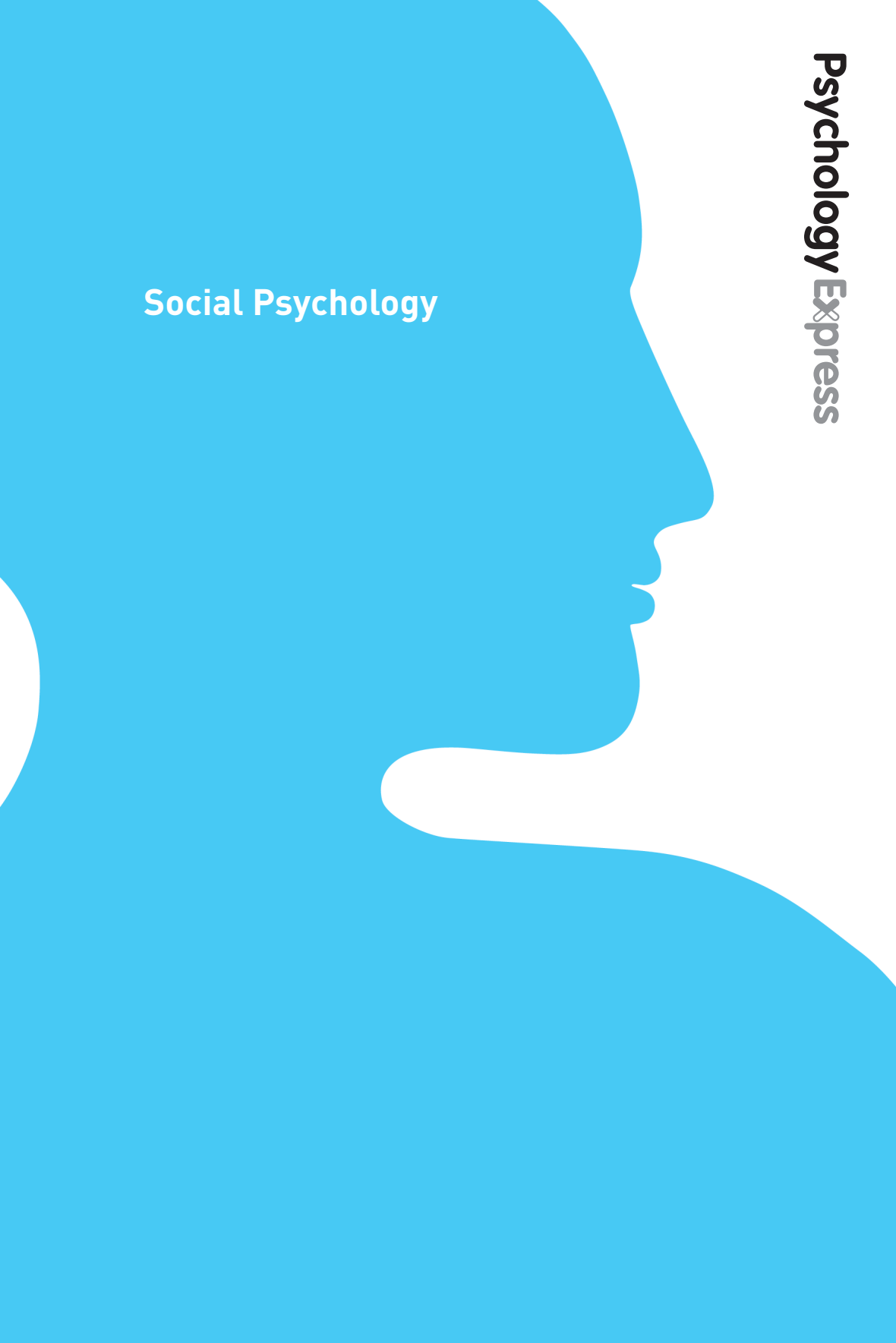
# Social Psychology

Jenny Mercer and Debbie Clayton

# Social Psychology



Psychology Express

## Sample question

Below is a typical essay that could arise on this topic.

**Sample question** *Essay*

To what extent does the psychological evidence support the claim that individuals will blindly conform or obey commands from an authority figure, even when this involves inflicting harm on others?

Guidelines on answering this question are included at the end of this chapter, whilst further guidance on tackling other exam questions can be found on the companion website at: **www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress**

# Conformity

## Informational–normative framework

Conformity can be defined as 'changing one's behaviour due to the imagined or actual presence of others'. The most frequently cited theoretical explanation for this commonly observed phenomenon is that we conform as a result of informational or normative influences (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). See Table 4.1 for an outline of the main features of these explanations, derived from the classic findings of Sherif and Asch. The conclusions in Table 4.1 represent the starting point of conformity research – you should note the caveats and critiques of these explanations which are discussed below.

## Social impact theory

Social impact theory (Latané, 1981) suggests characteristics of the group members are likely to affect conformity rates, such as:

- **strength** – the importance of the group to you and the specific nature of the group will have differing influences on normative and informational influence (expertise being important for informational influence, whereas identity may be more important for normative influence)
- **immediacy** – the closer the group is to you in space and time, the greater the conformity
- **number of people in the group** – this is not a linear relationship – a small increase to a small group will have a greater effect on conformity than a small increase to a large group and research suggests increasing the group size beyond four or five doesn't significantly increase conformity.

**Table 4.1** **Informational–normative influence framework for understanding conformity**

| | *Informational influence* | *Normative influence* |
|---|---|---|
| Definition | Individuals see other people as a source of information to guide their behaviour | Attitudes and behaviour are guided by the need to be liked or accepted by other people or to avoid looking foolish |
| Classic empirical evidence | Sherif's (1936) study of the autokinetic effect – evidence of conformity with an ambiguous task | Asch's (1951) conformity studies using the 'line experiment' – evidence of conformity with an unambiguous task (as determined by control studies) |
| Acceptance level | Can lead to private acceptance where there is genuine belief others are correct | Public compliance is shown, but viewpoint is not always privately accepted |
| Type of task | Tasks perceived as highly important are likely to increase conformity | Tasks perceived as highly important are likely to reduce conformity |

These ideas have been developed into a mathematical formula which purportedly predicts conformity rates (see Latané & Bourgeois, 2001). However, you should consider the extent to which this formula can be applied beyond an experimental setting. In these controlled settings participants are able to focus on one particular task. To understand conformity in real life, we would need to model how we make decisions when faced with competing priorities and how we may be influenced by the behaviour of people who are familiar to us. See Chapter 6, Prejudice and discrimination, for further discussions of how social identity may affect behaviour towards in group and out group members.

## Role of culture and gender

### *Culture*

It is generally accepted that collectivistic cultures are more likely to conform than individualistic cultures (Hodges & Geyer, 2006). However, there have been some contradictory findings – for example, Japanese participants have been found to be less conforming than US participants. In Japanese culture, cooperation is directed to the group to which you belong and identify with. Participants were therefore unlikely to conform with strangers (Williams & Sogon, 1984).

This demonstrates the biases our perspective may bring when applying a research paradigm to other cultures. It also highlights an important methodological point about the majority of conformity research. Generally,

the group members are not known to the participants. To what extent can the findings of these studies inform us about conformity in real life?

### *Gender differences*

Initially, it was thought that women were more conforming than men. However, reviews of conformity studies have shown the differences are not clear cut. On average, men are less likely to conform than women, but the differences are very small (Eagly & Carli, 1981). In addition, the differences in conformity depend on the type of normative pressure being applied. Sex differences are not apparent when participants give their responses in private. It has been argued that cultural expectations lead to gender-consistent behaviour, in that men are encouraged to be independent whereas women are encouraged to be agreeable and supportive.

The type of task also affects gender differences in conformity and can be determined by the gender of the researcher. Individuals are more likely to conform when confronted with an unfamiliar and unambiguous task. There may be unintentional sexism in the design of conformity tasks – for example, male researchers have been shown to be more likely to design studies with male-orientated tasks.

**CRITICAL FOCUS**

#### Interpretation of the Asch line paradigm?

Most commentaries on the findings of Asch have focused on the 28 per cent of participants who agreed with the majority incorrect response more than half the time. However, even Asch noted most people did not conform. Indeed, a typical participant dissented 75 per cent of the time. Findings are explained using the normative–informational influence framework, suggesting the greater conformity in public, as compared with private, is due to normative pressures – i.e., to avoid ostracism. But, since the majority dissented most or all of the time, it is difficult to comprehend how they avoided ostracism or ridicule. Researchers have questioned the idea that agreement on one trial labels that participant as conforming.

Hodges and Geyer (2006) argue that participants in Asch's study are not faced with a simple 'truth' versus 'consensus' dilemma, but need to balance multiple values. The values–pragmatics hypothesis proposes we agree with incorrect responses on some trials in order to resolve discrepancies between informational concerns ('What is true?') and normative concerns ('What ought to be done for the good of others and myself?'). In balancing these demands, many participants varied their responses, occasionally agreeing with the majority (demonstrating trust) and occasionally giving the accurate response (demonstrating truth). It is argued that this inconsistent behaviour may demonstrate rational behaviour in the circumstances.

### *Test your knowledge*

**4.1** How does social impact theory account for differential rates of conformity?

**4.2** Complete the table, highlighting in each empty cell (using a normative–informational influence framework) how the interaction of task importance and task difficulty affects conformity rates.

| | *Task importance* | |
|---|---|---|
| *Task difficulty* | Low | High |
| Easy | | |
| Difficult | | |

**4.3** Explain why researchers may have inappropriately concluded women are more conforming than men.

Answers to these questions can be found at: **www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress**

## ? *Sample question* — *Essay*

Conformity is a universal phenomenon across cultures and genders. Discuss.

**Further reading** Conformity

| *Topic* | *Key reading* |
|---|---|
| Social impact theory | Latané, B., & Bourgeois, M. J. (2001). Successfully stimulating dynamic social impact: Three levels of prediction. In J. P. Forgas & K. D. Williams (Eds.), *Social influence: Direct and Indirect Processes* (pp. 61–67). New York: Psychology Press. |
| Individualist and collectivist cultures and dissent | Hornsey, M. J., Jetten, J., McAuliffe, B. J., & Hogg, M. A. (2006). The impact of individualistic and collectivist group norms on evaluations of dissenting group members. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 42,* 57–68. |
| Values/pragmatics explanation of conformity | Hodges, B. H., & Geyer, A. L. (2006). A nonconformist account of the Asch experiments: Values, pragmatics, and moral dilemmas. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 10*(1) 2–19. |

# Social influence and inhumane behaviour

## Banality of evil perspective

We are socialised to obey rules and norms and this is generally useful for society. However, on occasion, obeying authority figures has led to tragedy, including genocide across the world.

Classic research has demonstrated that ordinary people were willing to inflict electric shocks on an innocent fellow participant (Milgram, 1963). Milgram (1974) drew from Arendt's 'banality of evil' perspective to explain his findings, suggesting atrocities occur due to social norms for 'obedience' in the presence of authority figures without any questioning. Table 4.2 outlines the aspects of the Milgram experiment which may have increased the display of obedience.

Milgram's research did not tell us about interpersonal and group relationships over time, something which is crucial in understanding tyranny. The Stanford prison experiment (SPE) represented a general movement away from explanations of acts that rely on individual personalities to a focus on group processes (Zimbardo, 1989). The findings are well known – that the guards became ever more violent and the prisoners became more damaged and withdrawn. Zimbardo proposed a role conformity explanation for guard aggression and has more recently explained atrocities of military police in Abu Ghraib in a similar way (Zimbardo, 2007). The perceived power of the guards role and being a member of the group led individuals to lose their identity and feelings of responsibility (known as deindividuation).

**Table 4.2 Factors leading to obedience in the Milgram experiment**

| | |
|---|---|
| Normative social influence | For society to operate effectively, the normative behaviour is to obey authority figures<br>**Evidence**: when there were dissenters in the group, conformity with the experimenter decreased |
| Informational social influence | The participant used the experimenter to help them decide what to do<br>**Evidence**: delivery of shocks was significantly reduced when the level of shock to give was proposed by a confederate of the experimenter rather than an expert and when experts showed disagreement about levels of shock to be administered |
| Conflicting norms | Initially, the norm of obeying an authority figure was appropriate, but the norm of not harming innocent people should have replaced this norm. It was difficult to switch norms in this situation due to key factors about the experiment, see below |
| No time for reflection | The experiment was fast-paced and involved many tasks (asking questions, determining whether or not the answers were correct and recording responses), preventing time for reflection |
| Self-justification | The small increments in delivering shocks created internal pressure to continue with the next shock. Once action has been taken on a difficult decision, we tend to internally justify that decision to reduce cognitive dissonance |
| Loss of personal responsibility | The experimenter is seen as taking responsibility for the participant's actions and any outcomes |

## Social identity explanation of inhumane acts

Reicher, Haslam and Rath. (2008) argue there is little evidence that authority figures induce a lack of awareness of what they are doing in those carrying out their orders. They suggest the banality of evil approach is not supported in experimental or historical case studies. In contrast, participants in Milgram's study did appear to be morally affected by their behaviour, as shown in interviews following the experiment. A blind 'conformity to roles' explanation is also critiqued. Firstly, Zimbardo appeared to play a significant leadership role in the SPE, secondly, not all the guards adopted a brutal persona and, finally, participants appeared to be aware and in control of their behaviour.

Reicher et al. (2008) suggest there has been an overemphasis on the perception of the out group and a lack of focus on understanding the participant's relationship with the in group. Acceptance of roles is likely to depend on whether individuals internalise group membership as part of their self concept. The authors draw on social identity theory and, particularly, self-categorisation theory (see Chapter 3, Self) to propose five steps which enable acts of tyranny:

1. creation of a cohesive in group through shared social identification
2. exclusion of specific populations from the in group
3. constituting the out group as a danger to the existence of the in group
4. representation of the in group as uniquely virtuous
5. celebration of out group annihilation as the defence of (in group) virtue.

**KEY STUDY**

### Reicher and Haslam (2006). Rethinking the psychology of tyranny – the BBC prison study

The social cognitive perspective, with its focus on understanding individual beliefs, attitudes and motivations, has dominated research in social psychology in recent times. Ethical concerns have also limited the number of large-scale studies involving realistic social situations and examining group processes over time. This has resulted in explanations of social behaviour based on examinations of individual cognitive and biological phenomena. Researchers have argued that we cannot simply add up findings from individual studies in a linear fashion. To gain a full understanding of the social influence process we must pay attention to the social context (group membership, interpersonal relationships, cultural expectations) and study these processes in real-life scenarios over a significant time period (Mason, Conrey & Smith, 2007).

The BBC prison study – a partial replication of Zimbardo's prison study – is a rare recent attempt to capture social influence processes in an experimental field setting (Reicher & Haslam, 2006). The aim was to study interpersonal and group processes by examining the interactions between groups of unequal power and privilege. The study was grounded in a social identity theoretical framework and manipulations were put in place to test elements of this theory.

This experiment produced very different findings from those of the SPE. The guards were reluctant to impose their power and authority over the prisoners. Prisoners