Key Study – Majority Influence
Asch (1951, 1952, 1956)

- **Aim** – To investigate whether people conform to a majority's incorrect answer in an unambiguous task.
- **Method** – Participants in groups of 7 or 8, judged line lengths by saying out loud which comparison line (1, 2, or 3) matched the standard line. Each group had only one real participant, the others were confederates of the experimenter. Real participant always went last but one so had heard rest of the answers. Each participant did 18 trials, on 12 of these (the critical trials) the confederates all gave the wrong answer.
- **Results** – In control trials participants gave wrong answer 0.7% of the time. In critical trials participants conformed to majority 37% of time. 75% conformed at least once. Afterwards, some said they didn't believe their answers but didn't want to look different.
- **Conclusion** – Task was easy to get right (shown by control group). Fact that 37% were wrong on critical trials showed they conformed to fit in.
- **Evaluation** – supports normative social influence theory. Low ecological validity (an artificial task).

CRITICISMS OF CONFORMITY STUDIES

- Artificiality – the above studies used well controlled and standardised procedures but mostly reflect conformity under laboratory conditions, with meaningless stimuli.
- The high conformity found may only reflect the norms prevalent in the USA in the 1950s. Replications have found widely varying rates of conformity in more recent times and when the studies have been conducted cross culturally.
- Ethics – subjects were deceived.

ASCH (1951, 1952, 1956)

Asch wanted to test conformity under non ambiguous conditions and, therefore, devised a very simple perceptual task of matching the length of a line to one of three other comparison lines. The task was so easy that control subjects made almost no errors. In the experimental condition only one real (naive) subject was tested at a time, but was surrounded by seven confederates of the experimenter, who were also supposed to be subjects but had been told beforehand to all give the same wrong estimate on 12 out of the 18 trials. The only real subject was second to last to give their estimate, and was, therefore, faced with either giving their own opinion or conforming to the group opinion on the critical trials.

The average rate of conformity was 32%. 74% conformed at least once and 26% never conformed.
Asch conducted variations to identify factors influencing conformity, such as:

- increasing the group size – Asch found little increase above 3 or 4, although other studies have found that larger groups will increase conformity but at a decreasing rate.
- providing support for the subject – when Asch provided an ally that agreed with the naive subject's estimates, conformity dropped to 5.5%. It seems that the unanimity of the group is important. If the ally changed to the group's estimates, then the naive subject would often follow suit.
- increasing the difficulty of the task – when the comparison lines were made closer in length, the rate of conformity increased.
- when the naive subject could write down their response, conformity dropped.

Even subjects that did not conform, felt strong social pressure to do so. One was heard to exclaim 'I always disagree – darn it!', and on being debriefed, commented 'I do not deny that at times I had the feeling "to heck with it, I'll go along with the rest"'.