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EFFECTS OF PRIOR AGREEMENT FROM OTHERS ON
TASK CONFIDENCE AND CONFORMITY

James W. Julian, C. Robert Regula, and Edwin P. Hollander
State University of New York at Buffalo

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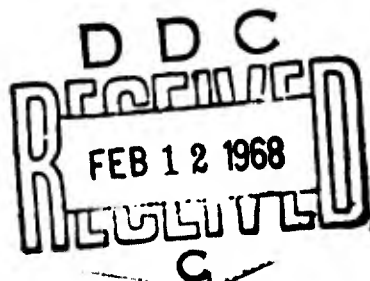
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Task Confidence and Conformity

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ABSTRACT

An experiment was conducted to explore further the relationship between prior agreement from others and subsequent conformity to their erroneous judgments. 240 Ss were arrayed in a 2 x 6 x 2 factorial design with sex, levels of prior agreement, and two questionnaire conditions defining each of the factors respectively. Two related hypotheses were tested: (1) that task confidence is a direct function of the level of prior agreement experienced; and (2) that conformity is curvilinearly related to the level of task confidence and prior agreement. Task confidence was thus hypothesized to mediate the relationship between agreement and conformity. During phase one of the procedure, Ss responded in the first position of a modified Crutchfield apparatus, where they saw either 100%, 75%, 50%, 25%, or 0% of their peers agree with them on each of 20 judgments of an unambiguous stimulus. In a control condition, no feedback was provided. In phase two, Ss shifted to the usual last response position and their conformity was assessed. Results confirmed the hypotheses. In addition, sex differences in reaction to prior agreement were explored.

Effects of Prior Agreement From Others On
Task Confidence and Conformity

James W. Julian, C. Robert Regula¹, and Edwin P. Hollander
State University of New York at Buffalo

This study investigates the relationship between an individual's conformity to the judgments of others in a group and the prior agreement or support which these others have shown him in making similar judgments. Adopting a social exchange view (see Homans, 1958, 1961), prior support or agreement from others should increase the likelihood of the individual's subsequent agreement or conformity to the group. This tendency to reciprocate support is also implied in the widely accepted relationship between group cohesiveness and conformity (Back, 1951; Schachter, 1951), and more recent investigations of reciprocity in interpersonal evaluations (Jones, 1964; Newcomb, 1959). Previous research, however, by Hollander, Julian, and Haaland (1965), Julian, Ryckman, and Hollander (1966), and Haaland (1967), has shown this to be an overgeneralized position in need of further refinement.

In these latter studies, the experience of high levels of agreement from others sometimes produced high subsequent agreement or conformity to the group, and sometimes it did not. The general relationship which emerged between level of prior agreement and subsequent conformity was a curvilinear one. Thus, it was found that unanimous agreement by others produced strong dependence and high conformity; majority agreement, without unanimity, led to almost complete independence of the group and low conformity; and minority agreement yielded moderate dependence and moderate levels of

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conformity. The question raised by these findings, viewed from the social learning framework, is what mediating processes are being reinforced by the agreement and implied support from fellow group members. In the present study, individual task confidence is hypothesized as this mediating link.

The effects of prior agreement by others on tendencies to conform no doubt depend on a number of the parameters of the group context. One important distinction, contributed by Deutsch and Gerard (1955), is whether the support has relevance to the normative or to the informational needs of the group members. Where normative pressures are dominant, agreement from others on task relevant decisions may function to define a norm of appropriate behavior leading to successful group outcomes. Here, agreement presumably builds dependence by reinforcing needs for social approval and acceptance. However, in situations where pressures toward uniformity are largely of an informational sort, prior agreement does not have clear implications for group locomotion, but rather reveals a common definition of reality. Where informational needs are dominant, agreement by others reinforces or supports the individual's confidence that his judgments or definition of the situation is correct, and hence, reduces his susceptibility to influence. As Hochbaum (1954) proposed in his analysis of the relationship between conformity and task confidence, "Perception of one's own level of competence is to a large degree also a function of agreement with appropriate social referents" (p. 679). In the present study, this formulation yields the hypothesis that the level of prior agreement is positively related to the individual's assessment of his own task competence.

The further question remains, however, of accounting for the curvilinear relationship between level of prior agreement and conformity. While the inverse relationship between task confidence and susceptibility to influence that Hochbaum (1954) and DiVesta (1959) proposed and verified may hold over a considerable range of confidence, we propose that very high levels of confidence may be fruitfully conceptualized as "overconfidence," a state in which susceptibility to influence is quite high. Overconfidence may be said to occur whenever one's abilities, perceptions, or view of reality remain untested or unchallenged. Many dimensions of the perception of reality may lie in this untested realm. Indeed, the power of the majority in the Asch-type influence paradigm may rest in part upon the unchallenged nature of our perceptions of simple stimulus events.

The fact that unchallenged beliefs may be highly susceptible to influence has been well documented in McGuire's (1964) investigations of the resistance of cultural truisms to influence. He found that exposing people to supportive information, consistent with the views they usually encountered in their culture, increased their susceptibility to subsequent influence on these beliefs. This vulnerability was further enhanced by providing reassuring feedback that others felt the same way that they did (Anderson and McGuire, 1965). Hence, it seems clear that high task confidence, as well as low, may heighten susceptibility to influence under conditions where the relevant ability or belief is unchallenged and the individual's appraisal of his competence is unrealistically high.

Problem

To test these relationships, the essential procedure used by Hollander, et al., (1965) and Julian, et al. (1966) was adopted. This procedure involves as a central feature a two-phase, social influence paradigm, using a simulated, 5-person group in a Crutchfield arrangement. During the first phase, each member reports his judgments of an unambiguous perceptual event to his fellow group members, and then ostensibly views the judgments of each of his experimental peers via signal lights on a panel before him. Following this "agreement" phase, each subject is led to believe that he has now shifted to the last response position, as in the usual Asch-Crutchfield procedure. For the present investigation, five levels of evident agreement were created during the first phase: 100% agreement, i.e., unanimous agreement with each judgment by the 4 others; 75% agreement, i.e., 3 others agreeing with the subject, one disagreeing on all trials; 50% agreement; 25% agreement; 0% agreement; and a no feedback, baseline condition. Within this paradigm, the following specific hypotheses were examined: (1) task confidence varies directly with the level of prior agreement experienced; (2) conformity bears a curvilinear relationship to perceived competence and the level of agreement, with higher conformity following both unanimous agreement and low levels of agreement, and lower conformity resulting from a high level (though not unanimous) agreement.

In addition to mapping the effects of agreement by the group on susceptibility to influence, the present study explores further the differential reactions of men and women to the prior agreement from others. A number of studies have reported the greater susceptibility of women to group influence, and earlier studies in the present program indicate a

different pattern of response by men and women to the levels of prior agreement from others.

Method

Subjects and Design

Two hundred forty undergraduate men and women at the State University of New York at Buffalo participated as part of their introductory psychology course requirements. Ten subjects were assigned to each cell of a $2 \times 6 \times 2$ factorial design, with sex, levels of agreement, and two questionnaire conditions defining each of the factors respectively. The six levels of prior group agreement were: 100%, 75%, 50%, 25%, and 0%, plus a no feedback condition. The questionnaire conditions differed in that half of all groups completed a questionnaire immediately following phase one, in addition to a final post-session questionnaire, while the other groups completed only the post-session questionnaire following phase two. This last factor permitted an assessment of the subjects' reactions to the support conditions per se. Of course, the presence or absence of the intervening questionnaire is a factor in the design only when considering conformity and post-session ratings. Data from the intervening questionnaire itself formed a 2×6 design.

Experimental Procedure

Subjects reported to the laboratory in groups of five of the same sex and were seated before signalling panels fixed in cubicles which visually isolated one from another. The situation was presented as a Navy research project which "was exploring procedures for processing group decision-making, where information is of the sort that is obtained from

radar equipment." The difficulty of the task and the need for continued vigilance were stressed.

The task required subjects to judge for each of forty trials which of three blue stimulus lights mounted on the wall went off first. Their judgments were to be communicated to the others in the group and to the experimenter. The first set of twenty judgments comprised phase one, during which each subject was given to understand that he was responding first and that the other four members of the group were responding in turn. For the second phase, subjects ostensibly shifted response order and perceived that they were in the last response position for a second set of 20 judgments. Subjects were led to believe that there would be additional sets of judgments, with the response positions differing for each set. Actually, all subjects responded at the same time for all trials and the apparent responses of fellow group members were fabricated by the experimenter. The second set of 20 trials constituted the typical conformity phase of the experiment, after which a brief post-session questionnaire was administered and subjects were debriefed.

Although subjects were instructed that there was a predictable, complex, pattern which governed the stimulus lights, actually the light which extinguished first was determined on a random basis, with one light extinguishing .05 seconds before the other two.

Manipulation of Group Agreement

Levels of agreement were created during the first phase by having different proportions of the group members appear to agree with the judgments made by the subject. This was accomplished by the experimenter's presenting particular patterns of lights on the signalling panels. To

ensure that subjects attended to these "communications," they were asked to record their own and their peers' judgments after each trial. For the 100% agreement condition, subjects saw all four of the other members of the group agree with them on each of the first 20 trials. For 75% agreement, they saw only three of the other four members agree with them, with a different member appearing to disagree on each trial. Fifty percent and 25% agreement conditions were similarly manipulated, and 0% agreement was created by having all of the other members disagree with the subject's judgments. For the no feedback condition, subjects responded to the stimulus lights independently without exchanging judgments on the first set of trials.

Measures

Conformity was assessed during phase two, in terms of the number of trials out of 20 on which the subject matched the erroneous judgments of the others. Reactions to the prior agreement conditions and to the experiment generally were obtained respectively from the intervening and post-session questionnaires. These questionnaires were comprised of 6-point, graphic rating items; specific items are shown in Tables 5, 6, and 7.

Results

Replication of Previous Findings

Predictions regarding the relationship between level of prior agreement and conformity had been earlier tested by Julian, et al. (1966). One aim of the present investigation was a replication and elaboration of these previous results. Table I compares the levels of conformity obtained for each sex in comparable conditions of the study by Julian, et al. (1966)

and the present investigation. Although the fit between the two sets of data is not precise, the degree of replication is quite compelling. In addition to the consistent sex differences, there is high conformity following 100% agreement, very low conformity following 75% agreement, and moderate levels of conformity following moderate levels of agreement. A measure of the comparability of the two investigations is shown in the analysis of variance summarized in Table 2. The most important finding is the absence of significant interactions between the prior agreement variable

Table 1

Mean Conformity by Sex Following Comparable Agreement
Conditions from Julian, Ryckman, and Hollander (1966) and the
Present Investigation (N = 10 per cell)

		Level of Prior Group Agreement					No feedback
		100%	75%	50%	25%	0%	
Julian, <u>et al.</u> (1966)	Men	5.8	3.5	6.0	4.4	2.2	4.5
	Women	9.4	3.8	9.0	6.3	8.3	4.7
Present Study	Men	4.1	1.4	4.7	2.3	2.1	2.9
	Women	9.5	3.3	4.9	7.5	4.1	4.1

and the replications factor. Other than the overall higher level of conformity found in the previous study (1966), there were no significant differences between the studies in the effects of the agreement conditions. These data also accord well with those reported by Hollander, Julian and Haaland (1965). This consistency in findings confirms the stability of the complex relationship between the level of agreement and conformity and lends greater emphasis to the reliability of the specific comparisons which are made in the present investigation.

Table 2

Analysis of Variance Summary for Conformity

Data Obtained by Julian, et al. (1966) and the Present Study

Source		df.	MS	F
Sex	(A)	1	355.3	12.7**
Support Conditions	(B)	5	119.8	4.3**
Replication	(C)	1	156.8	5.6*
AB Interaction		5	32.3	1.1
AC		1	.4	.0
BC		5	33.9	1.2
ABC		5	24.9	.9
Error		216	27.9	

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Effects of Agreement on Conformity

Disregarding condition differences, the average level of conformity for the present study was 4.2 matching responses on the 20 conformity trials. The comparable statistic for Hollander et al. (1965) was 3.4 and for Julian, et al. (1966), 5.6.

Table 3 presents the mean levels of conformity for all conditions for both men and women, and in Table 4 the analysis of variance summary for these data is shown. Strong sex differences were again found, women conforming almost twice as often as men (2.9 vs. 5.6 for men and women respectively). In addition, prior agreement was a significant determinant of the level of conformity. To test the hypothesized curvilinear relationship between conformity and level of agreement the significant condition effects were partitioned in terms of the trends across levels of prior group agreement. The hypothesized cubic trend was significant as predicted ($F = 11.2$, significant at the .01 level). No other trend components were significant (see Figure 1, page 12).

Table 3

Mean Conformity by Sex for Each Experimental Condition (N = 10 per cell)

		Level of Prior Group Agreement					No feedback
		100%	75%	50%	25%	0%	
Intervening questionnaire	Men	1.9	1.9	5.1	3.0	3.9	2.3
	Women	9.1	3.9	7.7	8.2	4.3	2.4
No Intervening questionnaire	Men	6.3	1.0	4.3	1.6	0.4	3.6
	Women	9.9	2.7	2.1	6.8	4.0	5.8

High levels of conformity emerged after 100%, unanimous agreement agreement, dropping to a significantly lower level of conformity following strong partial agreement (75%). A moderate level of support as represented by 50% agreement resulted in a moderate, though significant rise in conformity, and the low levels of support reflected in 25% and 0% agreement lowered the average level of conformity again. Figure 1 displays these shifts in conformity for both men and women. Pair comparisons were made by the Duncan Multiple Range test (Edwards, 1960).

Table 4
Analysis of Variance Summary for Conformity Data

Source		df.	MS	F
Sex	(A)	1	416.1	17.1**
Support Condition	(B)	5	99.8	4.1**
Questionnaire Condition	(C)	1	11.3	.5
A x B		5	46.8	1.9
A x C		1	4.8	.2
B x C		5	56.1	2.3*
A x B x C		5	24.4	1.0
Error		216	24.3	

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

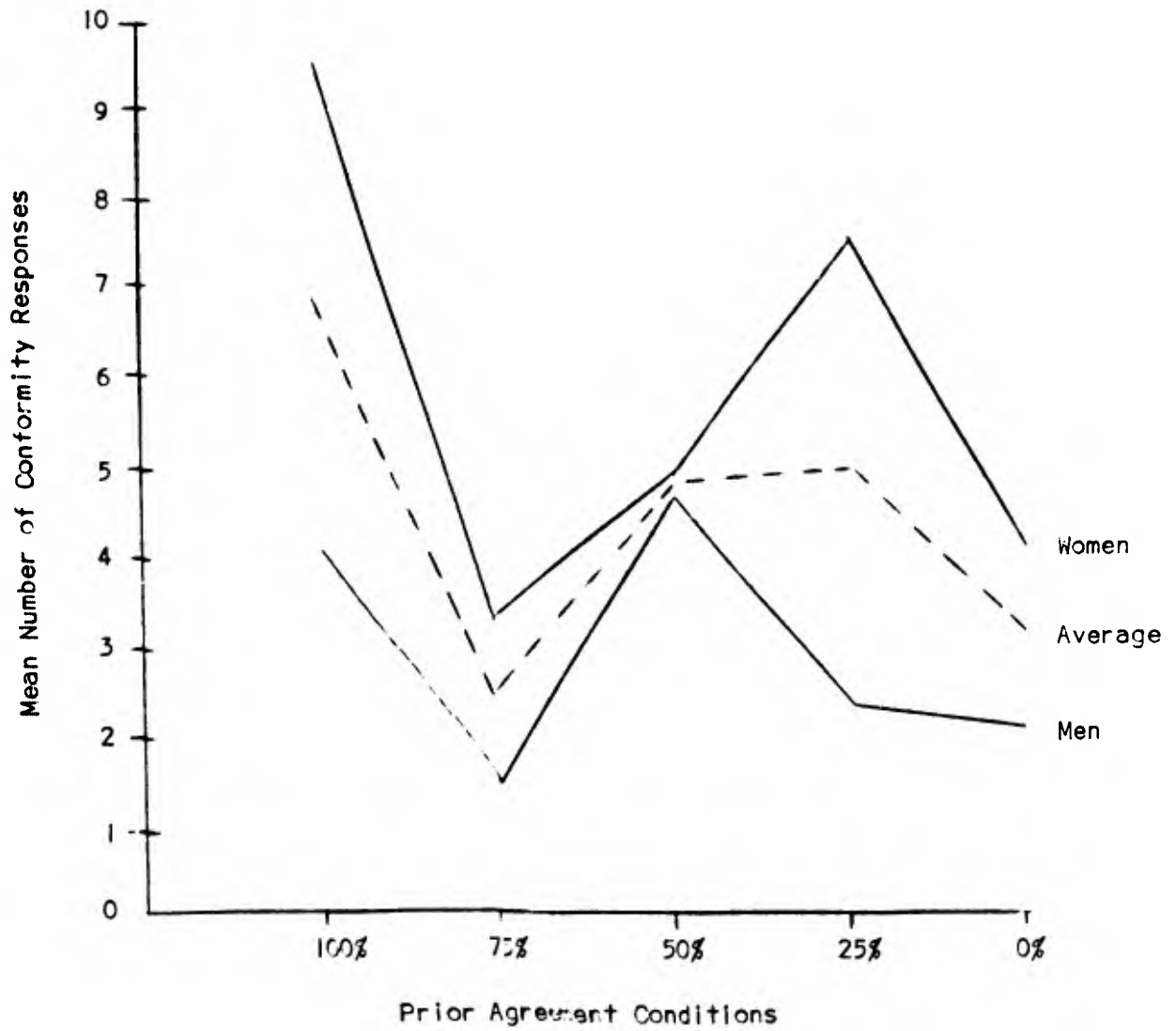


Fig. 1
 Mean Conformity by Sex Across Levels
 of Prior Group Agreement

The results in Tables 3 and 4 also indicate that there were no overall differences in conformity between those groups which received the intervening questionnaire and those which did not. Nor were there any significant sex differences between those groups which had or had not received the intervening questionnaire. There was, however, an interaction between the level of agreement and the questionnaire conditions, so that the effects of the intervening questionnaire cannot be disregarded. Following all but the 100% agreement condition, having completed the intervening questionnaire appeared to produce higher levels of conformity.

Mediating Role of Task Confidence

A major aim of the investigation was to plot the effects of levels of prior agreement on the confidence of the subjects in handling this task. Table 5 presents the mean responses to questions contained in the intervening questionnaire. Responses to item one, perceived disagreement, clearly indicated that subjects attended to the judgments of others as presented on their signal panels. As predicted, responses to the task confidence question (item 2) were strikingly related to the levels of prior group agreement, with the higher levels of agreement yielding higher task confidence. In addition, men were more confident on the whole of their performance than were women (4.3 versus 3.6; $F = 9.4$; $P < .01$). The related question of perceived task difficulty (item 3) also revealed differences as a function of the level of agreement. Supporting the rationale of our hypothesis, the 100% agreement condition was perceived significantly less difficult than any other condition. For this question there were no significant sex differences.

Table 5
Mean Reaction to Level of Agreement Revealed
on Intervening Questionnaire

Item:	Level of Prior Group Agreement					No feedback
	100%	75%	50%	25%	0%	
1. How often did you and the others disagree? ^b	1.6	3.2	3.8	5.0	5.5	___ ^a
2. How confident were you of your performance? ^c	4.5	4.3	4.1	3.5	3.4	3.8
3. How difficult were the light discriminations? ^d	1.9	2.7	3.2	3.0	3.5	2.6
4. How much did you enjoy this task?	4.3	4.5	4.6	4.2	3.7	3.7
5. How much were you influenced by the judgments the others made?	1.1	1.0	1.3	1.0	1.0	___ ^a
6. How much did you learn from your experience?	3.3	2.8	3.4	3.4	3.3	3.0
7. How often did you think you were wrong, when you and others disagreed?	3.0	2.8	2.9	3.1	2.7	___ ^a

a. These items were not applicable to the no-feedback conditions

b. F for levels of agreement = 24.9; $p < .01$

c. F for levels of agreement = 2.36; $p < .05$

d. F for levels of agreement = 6.66; $p < .01$

A question remains as to the relationship between task confidence and conformity. Consistent with our predictions, following 100% unanimous agreement, subjects were highly confident of their performance on what they perceived to be an easy task. Following strong partial support (75%), confidence remained high, but perception of task difficulty rose sharply and significantly. As the level of agreement continued to decrease, a corresponding decline in confidence occurred, with some increase in perceived task difficulty. These shifts in reaction to prior agreement are in line with our predictions, and tend to confirm our explanations of the subsequent levels of conformity.

Difficulties of interpretation arose, however, in accounting for the diminished conformity following the 0% agreement condition on the basis of these questionnaire reactions. Whereas confidence was low and perceived task difficulty tended to be higher, conformity nonetheless fell significantly. The remaining items on the intervening questionnaire presented in Table 5 are of little help in interpreting these findings. No comparisons for these ratings were significant.

Reactions to the Conformity Experience

In addition to the intervening questionnaire, all subjects completed a brief questionnaire at the end of the experimental session. These items presumably tapped the residual effects of both prior agreement experiences and group pressure trials. Table 6 presents the means for these ratings. Only two questions revealed differences as a function of prior agreement: "When you and the others disagreed, how often did you think that you were wrong?" and "How much were you influenced by the others' judgments?" In general, subjects felt that they were wrong

more often when they had experienced only weak agreement, while the perception of influence was quite low overall, being lowest in the 75% and 0% conditions and highest in the 100% agreement condition. There were no significant differences in enjoyment (item 5) or irritation (item 6). In addition to these condition differences, women, more than men, said that they had greater difficulty with the task, were less satisfied with their performance, felt that they were more influenced, and more often felt that they were wrong.

One additional item revealed differences in the effects of having earlier completed the intervening questionnaire. This question asked: "How often did you and the other members of the group disagree about

Table 6

Mean Reactions to Experiment Revealed on Post Questionnaire

Item:	Level of Prior Group Agreement					
	100%	75%	50%	25%	0%	No feedback
1. When the others disagreed with you, how often did you think you were wrong?	2.2	2.1	2.7	2.6	3.0	2.1
2. How much were you influenced by others' judgments?	2.1	1.4	2.0	1.8	1.5	1.9
3. How difficult were light discriminations during phase two?	3.1	2.9	3.2	3.1	3.2	2.8
4. How satisfied were you with your performance during phase two?	4.0	3.8	3.9	3.7	3.5	3.6
5. How much did you enjoy the study?	4.2	4.5	4.3	4.5	3.8	4.1
6. How often were you irritated by the others' judgments?	2.1	2.2	2.5	2.2	2.4	2.3

Table 7
Mean Rating of Frequency of Disagreement

		Level of Prior Group Agreement					No Feedback
		100%	75%	50%	25%	0%	
Intervening questionnaire	Men	5.9	5.6	4.8	5.5	5.1	5.9
	Women	4.4	4.6	4.0	4.3	4.4	5.4
No Intervening questionnaire	Men	4.5	4.8	5.3	5.0	5.0	4.5
	Women	4.2	5.3	5.7	4.7	5.9	4.4

the correct judgment on this second set of trials?" Mean responses to this item shown in Table 7 yielded significant interactions between the questionnaire conditions and both sex and prior level of agreement. The interaction with level of agreement clearly fit the pattern of actual "disagreement" that occurred. Under those conditions where conformity was higher, the perceived disagreement was correspondingly lower. The unexpected interaction with sex indicated that perceived disagreement was higher for men when they had completed the intervening questionnaire and for the women in the non-questionnaire conditions.

Discussion

Strong confirmation was obtained for the hypotheses that the level of prior agreement is positively related to individual task confidence and that task confidence mediated the effects of level of agreement on susceptibility to social influence. Level of agreement was again

curvilinearly related to subsequent conformity, with highest conformity following unanimous agreement, least conformity following strong majority support (75%), and moderate conformity following agreement from a minority of peers.

The high task confidence engendered by 100% agreement had been hypothesized to yield high susceptibility to influence since it was based on the individual's naive acceptance of his ability at the task. This interpretation was borne out by the subjects' high confidence ratings and low ratings of task difficulty following the 100% agreement manipulation. As in the McGuire research (1964), support is found for the importance of first challenging the individual's untested acceptance of his beliefs in order to induce resistance to subsequent influence. Other parallels exist between McGuire's (1964) inoculation model and the present social influence paradigm. For example, it was only in the 100% agreement condition that the intervening questionnaire increased resistance to influence. In this respect, the questions about task competence and task difficulty contained in the intervening questionnaire may have functioned as forewarning cues of the vulnerability of the subject's ability. If the intervening questions did have such effects, the inoculation model would have also predicted the lowered resistance to influence observed following the other agreement conditions in which threatening cues were already present in the disagreement among task judgments.

A number of sex differences in reaction to levels of prior agreement were also obtained. In general, women were less confident of their ability and, appropriately, more susceptible to influence. In addition,

as seen in Figure 1, women appeared to react differently than men to the 25% agreement condition. Conformity for women rose sharply in the 25% agreement condition, where the corresponding level for men fell. Again as would be predicted using the task confidence hypothesis, the rated confidence of the women also dropped sharply for the 25% support (2.8), but for the men remained at a moderately high level (4.3). Following the 0% agreement condition, conformity for women as well as men fell. Although no measures of interpersonal affect were obtained, it may be that following strong disagreement from the group, subjects began to reject others in the situation. This factor would account for diminished conformity in the face of the lowered task confidence. All in all, given the sex differences in reaction to the 25% level of agreement, it would appear that the masculine threshold for rejection of the group is lower than that for women.

Although the stability of the effects of prior agreement is borne out by the replication of earlier findings, it is important to note limitations on the generalizability of the findings which may account for our failure to find the usual reciprocation of agreement. In particular, it may have been especially important that the stimulus events here were unambiguous perceptual events. It was accordingly quite likely that subjects would readily accept the accuracy of their perceptions in the 100% condition. In addition, the use of the Crutchfield situation both eliminated the subtle affective cues in the communication of agreement and emphasized the relative independence of individual efforts at the task. Hence, normative social pressures were presumably quite minimal. Where such pressures are important, agreement may indeed be

reciprocated.

The question of the effects of suspicion naturally arises when employing deception. Although no measures designed to tap suspicion were included in the questionnaires, few subjects in the terminal interviews expressed suspicion that the signal lights were not the bonafide responses of their peers. The possibility that such suspicion interacted with the differential demands of the agreement manipulations cannot be ruled out. It seems reasonable, however, that the greatest suspicion would have occurred in the 0% agreement condition where all members appeared to choose a "clearly erroneous" response during phase one. Nevertheless, subjects in this condition showed relatively lower confidence; if strong suspicion had been aroused, it seems likely that these questionnaire differences would have been attenuated.

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