The influence of social pressure and black clothing on crime judgements

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Abstract

The impact of (i) social pressure and (ii) colour of clothing on participants' crime judgements were examined. A total of 49 participants participated in small groups. They were read a crime report, and answered questions aloud about this report. Unknown to them, some group members were confederates and gave incorrect answers to some of the questions. In each session either one or four confederates were present who wore either dark or light clothing. Results revealed that participants gave numerous incorrect answers, with the most incorrect answers being given when (i) there were four confederates, and (ii) the confederates wore dark clothing.

It is now half a century ago since Asch's (1951, 1955, 1956) classic conformity experiments were published in which he convincingly demonstrated that people's beliefs affect the beliefs of others. This effect of social influence has also been empirically illustrated in eyewitness testimony research. For example, in their eyewitness identification study, Baron, Vandello, and Brunsman (1996) asked people in groups of three (two of them were confederates) to identify a culprit in a line-up. Up to 50% of the participants conformed to the confederates' incorrect identifications.

Similar effects of social influence have also been found when slide-presented scenes (Roediger, Meade, & Bergman, 2001; Walther, Bless, Strack, Rachstraw, Wagner, & Werth, 2002) or stories (Betz, Skowronski, & Ostrom, 1996) are used as stimulus materials, and when participants are asked to make reality monitoring judgements (Hoffman, Granhag, Kwong See, & Loftus, 2001). These effects also appear to be robust when examined with more ecologically valid stimulus material (Gabbert, Memon, & Allan, 2003; Wright, Self, & Justice, 2000). For example, Gabbert et al. (2003) found that 71% witnesses to a video-presented staged crime incorporated non-witnessed details provided by a co-witness into their own account.

The present experiment also examined the impact of social influence on people's judgements and we predicted that the presence of peer confederates who give incorrect answers would lead participants to conform (Hypothesis 1). There are two reasons why people conform (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Through informational influence, when people conform because they believe others are correct in their judgements, or through normative influence, when people conform because they fear the negative social consequences of appearing deviant. Usually, informative and normative influences operate jointly (Insko, Drenan, Solomon, Smith, & Wade, 1983)[2]. Informational influence is more likely to occur when the questions are difficult to

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[2] Indeed, McCloskey and Zaragoza (1985) suggested that the well known 'misinformation effect' might in fact be a result of similar normative/informative social influence processes (which they refer to as 'misinformation acceptance'), in which participants simply give the answer that they think the researcher wants to hear (Ainsworth, 1998).

answer and participants are uncertain about the correct answers. In Asch's experiments, participants were conducting an easy task and, therefore, normative influence was most likely to occur. Indeed, although some of Asch's participants admitted that they came to agree with their group's erroneous judgements, normative influence was more prevalent as very few participants gave incorrect answers in the control condition where no incorrect information was provided by confederates. Moreover, when Asch asked participants to write their answers privately, their levels of conformity dropped sharply (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Our participants were not asked to complete a difficult task either, although the correct answers were probably less obvious than in Asch's experiments. We also expected normative influence to be prevalent and expected relatively few incorrect answers when the social pressure was low (Hypothesis 2).

We also added a factor to the design that, to date, has not been investigated in the social influence literature: the impact of the colour of clothing the confederates were wearing. Frank and Gilovich (1988) were the first researchers to demonstrate the impact of the colour of clothing on impression formation. In their experiment, referees were shown a videotape of an American football match and were asked to make judgements about the actions of the defensive team. In one version the defensive team wore a black uniform and in the other version they wore a white uniform. The offensive team wore red in both versions. Apart from the colour of the uniforms, the two versions of the football match were kept constant. Results revealed that the referees were more inclined to penalise the defensive team when it was wearing a black uniform. To explain these findings, Frank and Gilovich (1988) pointed out that the colour black has a negative connotation, and that people often associate the colour black with meanness and aggressiveness. As a result they also see more aggressiveness or more malevolent intent in the actions of players wearing black uniforms. Obviously, black clothing will not make an aggressive impression in all situations. For example, it is unlikely that vicars will make an aggressive impression when they wear their black robes, neither will a mourning group of people at a funeral be seen as aggressors when they wear black clothing. However, the effect

may occur in potentially aggressive settings. For example, Vrij (1997) found that undergraduates perceived a violent act as more aggressive when the violent person wore black clothing, and Vrij and Akehurst (1997) found that a woman who reported an alleged act of sexual harassment was perceived by undergraduates as more aggressive when she wore black clothing. Based on these findings it is plausible that people may appear more dominant when they wear black clothing, and we therefore predict that participants are more inclined to conform when the confederates wear black clothing (Hypothesis 3). We also investigated participants' confidence ratings in the answers they provided. We expected them (Hypothesis 4) to be most confident in the condition with the least social pressure (i.e. the one confederate, light clothing condition, see Method).

Method

Participants. A total of 49 undergraduate students participated, 27 males and 22 females. Their average age was 20.1 years.

Procedure. Participants were recruited at the University students' union and were asked to participate in a short psychology study. Those who were willing to participate were taken to a room in the students' union. The experiment was always conducted in a group consisting of five people. Hence, in the one confederate condition (see below) four participants took part at a time, and in the four confederate condition (see below) only one participant took part at a time. Confederates and participants were arranged in a circle. In the four confederates condition, the participant was given a seat immediately to the right of the experimenter with confederates occupying the remaining seats. In the one confederate condition, the confederate sat to the left of the experimenter and the participants occupied the remaining seats. In the one confederate condition, the confederate made sure she seated herself in the designated place before the participants seated themselves. When four confederates were present, three were already seated in the middle three seats of the circle when the participant arrived. The fourth confederate accompanied the experimenter in order to reduce demand characteristics. The fourth confederate

then ensured she occupied the seat to the left of the experimenter and the participant then had only the option of sitting in the seat to the experimenter's right.

First, all group members were asked to read and sign the informed consent form (confederates filled in these forms as well to reduce demand characteristics). The experimenter then read out the following instructions: "I will now read a short passage about a fictitious crime. Afterwards I will ask eight questions about what you have heard and will ask you to answer out loud one at a time when you are asked to do so.[3] Please do not ask any questions about the passage, as the answers you give must be based only on what you have heard. Please do not comment on or discuss the details of the passage or your answers with any other group member." The experimenter then read the following crime details aloud: "One afternoon, a man burst in a jewellery shop stealing over £1000 worth of items. The shop owner described the man as being white with blonde hair, and aged about 25 years old. He wore blue jeans and a red sweater. Shortly after the robbery, police saw a man wearing a black tracksuit running towards a bus stop. He had brown hair and was about 45 years old." The group were then asked the eight questions with the confederate to the experimenter's left being asked first and then working around the group in a clockwise direction. so that the participant(s) were always asked after all the present confederates. Following each response, participants were required to rate their confidence in their own answer on a 7-point Likert scale (1 being not confident at all, 7 being very confident). Each question was asked individually, i.e., each group member answered question 1 (including the confidence rating) before question 2 was asked. Confederates gave correct answers to questions 1, 2 and 6, and incorrect answers to the remaining four questions. The following questions were asked and the answers and confidence ratings given by the confederates are mentioned between brackets (in the four confederates condition, all four

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[3] This answering out loudly was introduced to induce social pressure on the participants. However, it is likely to have a motivational effect as well due to evaluation apprehension (Cottrell, 1968), that is, participants are likely to do their best in the presence of others who are in the position to evaluate their performance.

confederates gave the same answer to each question and the same confidence ratings): (1) According to the shop owner, what colour was the thief's hair? (blonde, 6); (2) How old was the thief in the shop owner's description? (25 years, 7); (3) How much money was the stolen jewellery worth? (£500, 7); (4) Based on the information given, do you think that the man the police saw running towards the bus stop was guilty or not guilty of the robbery? (guilty, 7); (5) What did the shop owner say the thief was wearing? (beige trousers and green sweater, 7); (6) What was the man seen running towards a bus stop wearing? (black tracksuit, 6); (7) How old was the man seen running towards a bus stop shortly after the robbery? (30 years, 6); and (8) What colour was the hair of the man seen running towards a bus stop? (black, 7).

Questions to which the correct answers were given (questions 1, 2 and 6) are further referred to as 'non conformity questions'. Presented in the text is the total accuracy score in answering these questions. Hence, one correct answer produces a 33% accuracy score, three correct answers a 100% accuracy score, etc.. The answer given to question 4 is further referred to as the 'verdict' question. Please note that the man the police saw running towards a bus stop did not match the description given by the shop owner, so that on the basis of the available evidence the participants could not possibly reach a 'guilty' verdict. The confederates gave incorrect answers to the remaining four questions (3, 5, 7, and 8), and these questions are further referred to as 'conformity questions'. Presented in the text is the total accuracy score in answering these questions, and therefore, one correct answer produces a 25% accuracy score, four correct answers a 100% accuracy score, etc..

Independent Variables. There were three independent variables introduced in the experiment. The Type of Questions (conformity and non conformity questions) has already been introduced above. Social pressure was manipulated with varying the number of confederates present in each group. In the low pressure condition one confederate was present and in the high pressure condition four confederates were present. All confederates were females.[4] The third factor was

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[4] In the four confederate condition all confederates had to be of the same sex otherwise gender

the colour of clothing the confederates were wearing. They either wore dark clothing (further referred to as 'black') or light clothing (further referred to as 'white').

Results

Although the suspect could not be found guilty on the basis of the available evidence, 30% of the participants gave a guilty verdict. Also, incorrect answers were frequently given to the remaining questions, especially to the conformity questions. In total 31%[5] of the answers given to these questions were incorrect, and 61%[6] of the participants gave at least one incorrect answer to a conformity question. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the results as a function of experimental conditions. The guilty verdicts varied per condition and ranged from 00% (in the one confederate, white clothing condition) to 56% in the four confederates, black clothing condition. The percentage of incorrect answers given to the conformity questions was lowest in the one confederate, white clothing condition (92% correct and 8% incorrect answers) and highest in the four confederates, black clothing condition (41% correct and 59% incorrect answers). The majority of participants (75%) gave correct answers to all conformity questions in the one confederate, white clothing condition, whereas none of the participants answered all answers correctly in the four confederates, black clothing condition.

Guilty verdicts.[7] In order to test the influence of clothing and social pressure on guilty verdicts,

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would have become a confounded variable in the Social Pressure conditions, that is, single gender in the one confederate condition, and mixed gender in the four confederates condition.

[5] In most cases (68%) where participants gave incorrect answers to conformity questions, they gave the same answer as given by the confederate(s). In the remaining cases, they answered' I don't know' (10%) or they gave an incorrect, but different, answer (22%) than the confederate(s). Since all these answers are incorrect, we treat them all as incorrect answers in the further analyses.
Question 1 resulted in 25% incorrect answers, question 5 in 22% incorrect answers, and questions 7 and 8 in respectively 39% and 37% incorrect answers.

[6] Four percent answered all four conformity questions incorrectly, 12% gave one correct answer, 25% gave two, and 20% gave three correct answers.

[7] Two participants (one in the four confederates, dark clothing condition, and one in the four confederates, light clothing condition) did not give a guilty or not guilty verdict, and were therefore dropped from these analyses.

a loglinear analysis was carried out with guilty verdicts, social pressure and clothing as variables. The analysis revealed one effect, a guilty verdict X social pressure effect, $\underline{X}^2$(1, n=47) = 4.28, $\underline{p}$ < .05. More guilty verdicts (47%) were given in the four confederate condition than in the one confederate condition (18%), supporting Hypothesis 1. Table 1 shows that in the condition with the least social pressure (one confederate, white clothing condition) all participants gave the correct, not-guilty, verdict, suggesting that the guilty verdict question was easy to answer. Therefore, normative influence is the most likely explanation for the above-mentioned effect, which supports Hypothesis 2. Although the clothing effect was not significant, $\underline{X}^2$(1, n = 47) = .19, $\underline{ns}$, Table 1 suggests that clothing did have an impact but only in the low social pressure (i.e. one confederate) condition. In the high social pressure condition (when four confederates were present), the clothing had no impact on participants' guilt judgements (40% guilty verdicts when the four confederates wore white clothing and 56% guilty verdicts when they wore black clothing, $\underline{X}^2$(1, n = 19) = .50, $\underline{ns}$. However, in the low social pressure condition, colour of clothing did have an effect with many more guilty verdicts (42%) given when the confederate wore black clothing compared to when she wore white clothing (0%), $\underline{X}^2$(1, n = 28) = 9.98, $\underline{p}$ < .01. This partially supports Hypothesis 3.

In order to examine the effects of Clothing and Social Pressure on confidence expressed in the guilty/not guilty verdicts, an ANOVA was conducted with Clothing (black vs white) and Social Pressure (one vs four confederates) as factors and confidence as dependent variable. Only one effect, the Social Pressure X Clothing interaction effect, was significant, $\underline{F}$(1, 43) = 6.48, $\underline{p}$ < .05, eta^2 = 13%. The interaction effect is shown in Table 2. Table 2 reveals that the highest confidence was expressed in the one confederate, white clothing condition (the condition where all participants reached a not guilty verdict). The confidence in this cell was significantly higher than the confidence in most other cells (see Table 2). This supports Hypothesis 4.

Accuracy and confidence in answering conformity and nonconformity questions. In order to examine the impact of clothing and social pressure on accuracy in answering conformity and

non conformity questions, an ANOVA was carried out utilising a mixed design with Type of Question (conformity vs non conformity), Social Pressure (one vs four confederates) and Clothing (white vs black) as factors and accuracy as dependent variable. Type of Question was a within-subjects factor and Social Pressure and Clothing were between-subjects factors. The analysis revealed three significant effects, a main Type of Question effect, $\underline{F}(1, 45) = 41.70$, $p < .01$, eta^2 = 48%; a main Social Pressure effect, $\underline{F}(1, 45) = 14.24$, $p < .01$, eta^2 = 24%; and a Type of Question X Social Pressure interaction effect, $\underline{F}(1, 45) = 28.92$, $\underline{p} < .01$, eta^2 = 39%. Since the higher order Type of Question X Social Pressure interaction effect is more informative than the Type of Question and Social Pressure main effects, only the interaction effect will be discussed. As can be seen in Table 3, social pressure only had an effect on participants' answers to the conformity questions, with a considerably lower accuracy score (46%) when four confederates were present than when one confederate was present (87% accuracy). This difference regarding the conformity questions was significant, $\underline{F}(1, 47) = 36.85$, $\underline{p} < .01$, eta^2 = 44%, and supports Hypothesis 1. Since a high percentage of questions were answered correctly in the one confederate condition (87%), the findings suggest that the questions were relatively easy to answer and that participants were more prone to normative influence than to informational influence. This supports Hypothesis 2.

The Type of Question X Clothing effect almost reached significance, $\underline{F}(1, 45) = 3.70$, $\underline{p}$ = .06, eta^2 = 8%. This effect is displayed in Table 4. Table 4 shows that, similar to the significant effect regarding Social Pressure, Clothing only had an effect on participants' responses to the conformity questions. Fewer replies (61%) to these questions were correct when the confederates wore black clothing than when they wore white clothing (77%), and this difference regarding conformity questions was significant, $\underline{F}(1, 47) = 3.61$, $\underline{p} < .05$, one-tailed, eta^2 = 7%.[8] This supports Hypothesis 3.

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[8]   The effects of Peer Pressure and Clothing on answering conformity questions occurred independently from each other, as the Peer Pressure X Clothing interaction effect regarding answering conformity questions was not significant, $\underline{F}(1, 45) = .01$, $\underline{ns}$.

In order to examine the influence of social pressure and clothing on confidence in answering the conformity and non conformity questions, a Type of Question X Social Pressure X Clothing ANOVA was conducted with confidence as dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for Type of Question, $\underline{F}(1, 45) = 4.39$, $\underline{p} < .05$, eta^2 = 9%. Participants expressed higher confidence ($\underline{M} = 6.58$, $\underline{SD} = .5$) in their answers to the non conformity questions than in their answers to the conformity questions ($\underline{M} = 6.45$, $\underline{SD} = .5$). The Social Pressure X Clothing interaction effect was also significant, $\underline{F}(1, 45) = 4.38$, $\underline{p} < .05$, eta^2 = 9% and is displayed in Table 5. Similar to the confidence regarding guilty/not guilty verdicts, the participants in the one confederate, white clothing condition expressed most confidence overall in the replies to their questions. This supports Hypothesis 4. Perhaps more interesting is the level of confidence expressed when answering conformity questions as a function of clothing and social pressure. An ANOVA with Social Pressure and Clothing as factors and the level of confidence regarding conformity questions as dependent variable revealed that, again, highest confidence was expressed in the one confederate, white clothing condition (see Table 6). Participants' confidence in this condition was significantly higher than the confidence expressed in the other cells (see Table 6). This supports Hypothesis 4.

In order to explore whether accuracy and confidence were related to each other, a Pearson correlation was conducted between participants' accuracy regarding the conformity questions and their confidence in these answers. The correlation was significant, $\underline{r}(49) = .29$, $\underline{p} < .05$, indicating that as accuracy increased, confidence also increased.

Discussion

The experiment clearly demonstrated that crime judgements could be influenced by the opinions of others. In the condition with the least social pressure (one confederate wearing light clothing) none of the participants reached a guilty verdict, whereas in the other conditions between 42 and 56 percent of the participants gave guilty verdicts. These percentages are high, given the fact that a guilty verdict could not have been given on the basis of the available

evidence. Guilty verdicts were more likely to occur when there were four rather than one confederate expressing guilty verdicts. The colour of clothing the confederates were wearing did have an effect as well, but only in the one confederate condition. Guilty verdicts were more likely to occur when the single confederate wore dark clothing rather than light clothing. In the four confederate condition the colour of clothing had no impact, suggesting that in that situation, where the participants were confronted with four group members who gave a guilty verdict prior to the participant was asked about his/her verdict, the presence of the others overshadowed the impact of the colour of their clothing. Although the colour of clothing effect was less powerful than the number of confederates effect, we believe it is noteworthy as people are likely to be less aware of this effect. That is, observers might well be aware that an individual group member who is confronted with a group opinion will be affected by that group opinion, but they may be less aware that the colour of clothing the other group members are wearing will also have an effect on the individual's opinion.

Apart from providing guilty and not guilty verdicts, participants were also asked factual questions about the crime. The results followed the verdict pattern described above. Participants were inclined to conform to incorrect answers, particularly when they were confronted with a group of people who expressed these incorrect opinions, and particularly when these people wore dark clothing.

Despite providing these erroneous answers and unjustified guilty verdicts, there is indirect evidence that participants were at least aware that something peculiar was going on, as (i) they expressed most confidence in their answers and verdicts when the least social pressure was available (in the one confederate, light clothing condition), and (ii) accuracy at answering questions was positively correlated with confidence in these answers. However, their diminished confidence when providing incorrect responses did not prevent them from giving these incorrect responses in the first place.

There are several explanations why dark clothing may have affected the participants'

judgements. Perhaps participants were reluctant to disagree with confederates in dark clothing (normative influence), or, alternatively, dark clothing enhanced the believability of the confederates (informational influence). Also, a combination of both influences could have taken place. We are reluctant to suggest that dark clothing *per se* increased the believability of the confederate. In their colour of clothing experiment, Vrij and Akehurst (1997) measured the believability of a person wearing black or light clothing and found that dark clothing did not increase believability. However, there might have been an indirect effect.[9] Perhaps wearing dark clothing would have led to higher assertiveness of the confederates, which in turn may have enhanced their believability. There is evidence that wearing dark clothing affects someone's behaviour. Frank and Gilovich (1988), for example, demonstrated that wearing dark clothing led their participants becoming more aggressiveness. With hindsight, it is unfortunate that we did not question participants about their reasons for conforming.

Perhaps another shortcoming of the study is that, because there were no incentives for participants, they may have been poorly motivated. However, given the nature of our experimental situation, we do not believe this to be the case. Our participants knew that they had to openly express their answers in front of fellow students, and in such situations people are typically motivated to perform well (Baron et al., 1996; Cottrell, 1968). Also, motivation was likely to be the same in all four conditions of the experiment and therefore cannot account for the differences we found between these four conditions.

In summary, the present experiment demonstrated that people could be influenced when making crime judgements by (i) social pressure and (ii) the colour of the clothing other people in their group are wearing. Regarding this colour of clothing effect, we would like to stress again that the effect is situational and therefore cannot be generalised to all contexts. For example, as mentioned above, mourners at a funeral are unlikely to appear dominant when they

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[9] **We are an anonymous reviewer grateful for this suggestion.**

wear black clothing. It might even be the case that in other settings where authority figures wear white clothing, such as clinical settings, white clothing will be associated with dominance[10]. Future research could examine this.

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[10] **We are an anonymous reviewer grateful for this suggestion**.

Table 1.

Guilty Verdicts and Accuracy Scores per Experimental Condition

PERCENTAGES

	Guilty verdicts	Correct/incorrect answers to conformity questions		Pts who answered all conformity qus correctly
		Correct	incorrect	
One confederate, black clothing	42%	79%	21%	50%
One confederate, white clothing	00%	92%	08%	75%
Four confederates, black clothing	56%	41%	59%	00%
Four confederates, white clothing	40%	53%	47%	10%

Table 2.

Confidence in Guilty/Not Guilty Verdicts as a Function of Social Pressure and Clothing

	Confederates			
Clothing	One		Four	
	m	sd	m	sd
White	6.69^b	(.7)	6.00^a	(1.4)
Black	5.50^a	(1.2)	6.40^{ab}	(.8)

Note: Only cells with a different superscript differ significantly ($p < .05$) from each other

Table 3.

Accuracy of Answers to Conformity and Non Conformity Questions as a Function of Type of Question and Social Pressure

	questions			
Confederates	non conformity		conformity	
	m	sd	m	sd
One	.90	(.2)	.87	(.2)
Four	.94	(.2)	.46	(.3)

Table 4.

Accuracy of Answers to Conformity and Non Conformity Questions as a Function of Type of

Question and Clothing

	questions			
Clothing	non conformity		conformity	
	m	sd	m	sd
White	.91	(.2)	.77	(.3)
Black	.93	(.2)	.61	(.3)

Table 5.

Confidence in Replies to Conformity and Non Conformity Questions as a Function of Social

Pressure and Clothing

	Confederates			
Clothing	One		Four	
	m	sd	m	sd
White	6.71^b	(.3)	6.41^{ab}	(.2)
Black	6.35^a	(.6)	6.51^{ab}	(.2)

Note: Only cells with a different superscript differ significantly ($p < .05$) from each other

Table 6.

Confidence in Replies to Conformity Questions as a Function of Social Pressure and Clothing

	Confederates			
Clothing	One		Four	
	m	sd	m	sd
White	6.79^b	(.3)	6.27^a	(.4)
Black	6.23^a	(.7)	6.36^a	(.3)

Note: Only cells with a different superscript differ significantly ($p < .05$) from each other

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