

Gestalt Psychology Finds a Home:

Solomon Asch, Unexpected Social Psychologist

Mark F. Stasson

Metropolitan State University

Note to self – I need more work on APA format

Abstract

Solomon Asch is recognized as a noteworthy social psychologist, his primary work applied gestalt principles to perception and learning using social stimuli. In the later stages of his career, Asch was active in cognitive psychology, cross-cultural studies, and international conflict. Asch learned Gestalt principles from Max Wertheimer and Wolfgang Kohler and applied them to social stimuli, which led to classic experiments in conformity, impression formation, and social judgment. Asch's decision to examine people, rather than inanimate objects, as perceptual stimuli led him to his status as a central figure in early social psychology. Asch's work was the basis of several theoretical debates in the last 30 years and his classic studies have a prominent place in most introductory psychology textbooks.

Gestalt Psychology Finds a Home:

Solomon Asch, Unexpected Social Psychologist

Solomon Asch is recognized as an important influence in social psychology. His work on conformity and group influence is cited in many Introductory Psychology texts (e.g., Feldman, 1996; Myers, 2005), and this research program is generally considered to be one of the classic lines of work in psychology. In social psychology, Asch is also known for work in impression formation and on conformity (Brehm, Kassin, & Fine, 2005; Myers, 2007; Taylor, Peplau, & Sears, 2003), which places his work within most sub-divisions of social psychology (social cognition, social influence, and group dynamics). Furthermore, Asch (1952) wrote one of the more important early textbooks in social psychology, which noted that “Behavior is not a response to the world as it is, but to the world as perceived” (p.). This firmly established perception as a key component of social psychology, adopting a position at odds with the dominant behaviorists of that era.

While Asch’s influence today is noted primarily in social psychology, he was a Gestalt Psychologist working on problems in basic psychology areas such as perception, learning, thinking, and judgment. It was his use of social stimuli

(e.g., persons, groups, personality traits) and his eventual writings in *Social Psychology* (e.g., Asch, 1952), that led his work to be viewed as a foundation of social psychology (McCauley & Rozin, 2003). Furthermore, as a Gestalt Psychologist whose career spanned almost 50 years, the work of Asch and his associates kept consciousness in the domain of psychology from the ending of the functionalist period, through the humanist movement, and up to the cognitive revolution.

Solomon Asch's Background and Career

Education and Work History

Solomon Asch was born in Poland, and immigrated to U.S. with his family in 1920 at the age of 13. Asch attended colleges in the New York City area, earning his bachelor's degree from the City College of New York in 1928 (Gleitman, Rozin, & Sabini, 1997). At Columbia University, Asch studied with a number of scholars who were not caught up in the way of behaviorism prevalent at that time. Asch's mentors at Columbia included Robert Woodworth, who studied the functions of consciousness, Ruth Benedict, an anthropologist who used gestalt philosophy to study cultures, and Otto Klineberg, a scholar who studied cross-cultural differences in behavior and emotions.

After earning his Ph.D. from Columbia in 1932, Asch started his academic

career with faculty positions in the New York City areas, at both Brooklyn College and the New School for Social Research. After becoming a more established scholar, Asch went on to hold faculty and research positions at Swarthmore College, Rutgers University, and the University of Pennsylvania until his retirement in 1979.

Asch's mentors, and those he mentored

Studying with Klineberg, Benedict, and Woodworth at Columbia certainly played a significant role in the work Asch would complete, and provided a firm foundation from which to oppose the behaviorist movement that dominated psychology. However, his orientation to Gestalt Psychology was gained most fully from Max Wertheimer, who was on the faculty at the New School for Social Research (Gleitman, Rozin, & Sabini, 1997). In the Gestalt tradition, Asch conducted work in learning and memory applicable to real-life events he observed. Upon Wertheimer's death in 1943, Asch was hired to replace him at the New School. In 1947, Asch moved to Swarthmore College to work with Gestalt pioneer Wolfgang Kohler and other like-minded scholars. It was during Asch's 19 years at Swarthmore, the last remaining hotbed of Gestalt Psychology, that he would do his most important work (Asch, 1968; Gleitman, Rozin, & Sabini, 1997).

Unlike many noted Psychologists, Asch spent his most productive years working at schools that did not have doctoral programs. As such, there is no list of doctoral students mentored by Asch, who, presumably, would have directly extended his work. Asch's impact on others has been less direct, either through inspiring those interested in his work (see Leyens & Corneille, 1999; and Levine, 1999) or by mentoring junior colleagues such as Abraham Maslow, Stanley Milgram, and Henry Gleitman. Being more of a "generalist" in the Gestalt tradition, it is interesting to see how Asch impacted the key works of individuals who became prominent in diverse areas such as Humanistic Psychology (Maslow), Social Psychology (Milgram), and Cognitive Psychology (Gleitman). Asch was also noted as a very encouraging mentor to undergraduate students (see Kendler & Kendler, 2003).

The Gestalt Perspective

Need to work on this more. History of Gestalt Psych and its main principles. Cover Wundt, Structuralism, and Behaviorism and how they were at odds/opposition compared to Gestalt.

Social Psychological Research

- a. Impression formation (1946): Central Traits (Warm vs. cold)

Describe these studies and the “central trait” explanation, which was based a holistic (Gestalt) theory. A classic study social cognition study that is still cited in social psych textbooks (e.g., Myers, 2007; Taylor, Peplau, & Sears, 2003).

b. Conformity in the line judgment task (1956)

Asch’s most famous work, summarize findings and implications

c. Social judgment

d. Did Asch view his work differently from how it is remembered?

IV. Behavioristic and Cognitive alternative explanations for Asch’s majors findings.

Behaviorism in conformity (social rewards)

Cognitive Explanations for “Central Traits”

In the 1980's, work by cognitive and social psychologists debated the role of central traits and holistic judgment, with many arguing for a more reductionistic and parsimonious explanation (Anderson & Birnbaum, 1976).

V. Lasting Impact on others

a. Few graduate students, but did mentor Milgram and Maslow

b. Large numbers of researchers in social cognition and social influence

have been impacted - either to extend his work (social cognition; conformity/majority influence) or to oppose it (reductionist views of cognition; minority social influence). In fact, Asch's two primary research findings, the central trait and conformity to the majority, each stimulated hundreds of studies aimed at either supporting his findings, applying his principles, or attempting refute his explanations in favor of alternative viewpoints. These many studies inspired by Asch's work earned Asch a distinguished scientific contribution award from the American Psychological Association.

The central trait concept, in particular, generated much opposition from those favoring a more reductionistic approach to impression formation.

VI. Cross-cultural Issues

a. Importance of "context" - culture as context

b. International relations

c. Solomon Asch Center for Ethnopolitical Conflict

VII. Future Impact (I need to work on this!)

- A. Group Dynamics
- b. social cognition
- c. cross-cultural studies

I wonder if Solomon Asch suspected, or could even imagine, that by selecting stimuli such as simple trait descriptions of fictitious people (as opposed to objects) would change the way his career and the way his work was viewed by Psychology for decades (and beyond). By applying the gestalt principles and a holistic approach to people, groups, and other social settings, Asch became a central figure in social psychology and will most likely continue to be remembered as a noted psychology scholar for many more years to come.

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