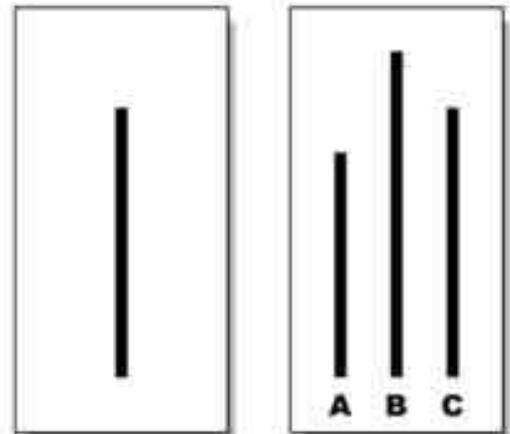


TRAUMA-RELATED PSYCHOLOGY EXPERIMENTS

Heinous acts such as murder and abuse often elicit many questions. How could a human being inflict pain on another? Why are people in war so violent? How can genocide get so out of hand? For many years, psychologists and researchers have worked hard to find answers to help us understand why certain people behave the way that they do. Countless studies have been conducted throughout the years; far more than can be discussed in a short blog post, so let's focus on a few that have led to groundbreaking revelations in regards to the topics covered in this course. All of these experiments are considered unethical by today's standards, but still provide a valuable amount of information about violence and trauma, so let's get started!

ASCH CONFORMITY EXPERIMENTS

Dr. Solomon Asch and his team tested the extent to which individuals will conform through his famous line-matching experiments. In 1951, Asch generated a study to determine how much influence a group could have on one's conformity. To test this, he had a participant complete a line-matching test alongside seven other actors who had agreed on a response before the participant entered the room. The eight people were shown images like the one to the right and asked to state aloud which of the three labeled lines matched the original line on the left side. Results showed that **32%** of participants conformed to the group's answer choices even when they were clearly wrong. About **75%** of participants conformed at least one time throughout the 12 trials and only **25%** did not conform at all. Asch also had a control group where there were no actors and fewer than **1%** of participants in this group answered incorrectly. At the conclusion of the test, participants were asked why they conformed and most stated that they did not agree with the answers, but wanted to fit in and not be made fun of (**normative influence**) while others truly believed the group's responses were right and that they were not as informed as the group (**informational influence**) (McLeod 2008). Asch continued to perform this study under different circumstances and found that group size made a difference. The more people in a group that share a certain opinion, the more likely an individual was to conform. Conformity was reduced when there was at least one other person in the group that shared the belief of the individual being tested. Conformity increased when the length of the lines became more difficult to judge, suggesting that people are more likely to look to others for confirmation when faced with difficult circumstances. All of these findings help to explain the type of conformity that leads to heinous acts such as the genocide carried out by the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101. For a video click [here!](#)



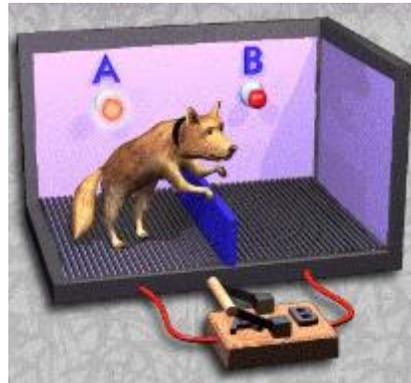
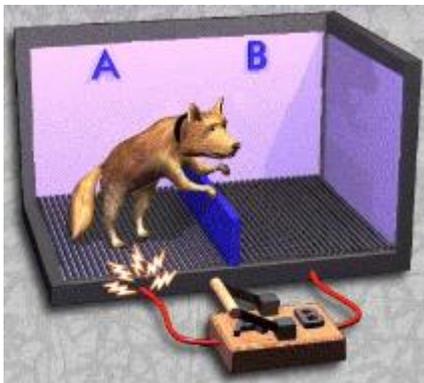
ELLIOTT BLUE EYES VS. BROWN EYES EXPERIMENT

Unlike the other studies discussed today, this one was not conducted by psychologists. This is an experiment that was conducted by an Iowan third-grade teacher, Jane Elliott. On April 5, 1968, the day after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., Elliott decided to show her students how easy it was to be influenced by racism. At the beginning of class, she told her students that those with blue eyes were better than those with brown eyes. The blue-eyed students would be allowed to play in recess for an extra 5 minutes, use the playground equipment and drink out of the water fountain while the brown-eyed students would have to drink out of paper cups and wear collars around their necks so they could be easily identified from a distance. Students with different colored eyes could not play together. The students

resisted at first, but quickly began to adopt the idea that blue-eyed people were better than brown-eyed. By the end of the day, students were using “brown-eyed” as an insult. The blue-eyed students started bullying the brown-eyed students who began to develop self-doubt and believe that they truly were not as good as the blue-eyed students. Blue-eyed students suggested that the teacher use a yardstick to discipline brown-eyed students that misbehaved. Two students even got into a physical altercation. Elliott was shocked by the results and decided to switch the roles the following day. She told her students that she had made a mistake the previous day and that brown-eyed students were actually better than blue-eyed students. The brown-eyed students now reaped the benefits while the blue-eyed students were subjected to the treatment they inflicted on the brown-eyed students the day before. Elliott revealed the experiment to the students and they were shocked that they were able to discriminate against their own friends so easily. Fourteen years later, the class reunited with Elliott and told her that they were still affected by the unforgettable experiment. This study, like the previous one, explains the facility with which people conform. Unlike Asch’s study, Elliott’s shows that people are likely to conform in the presence of authority. This too explains how people were capable of following orders to kill others in genocides or wartime. For a *Frontline* episode about this study click [here!](#)

SELIGMAN LEARNED HELPLESSNESS EXPERIMENT

Dr. Martin Seligman and his colleagues conducted a study in 1965 to test the relationship between fear and learning. The multi-stage experiment was set up by first eliciting fear in a dog through classical conditioning. To do this, Seligman administered a non-damaging shock to the dog every time he sounded a bell. After a while, the dog related the bell sound to the shock and reacted in a fearful way. In the next step, the conditioned dog was placed into a box that was divided in two by a low fence which allowed the dog to see across to the other side. Seligman then rang the



bell and shocked the dog, waiting for it to jump to other side, but nothing happened. Instead, the dog lay down and did the same even when the shock was administered without the bell sound. When an unconditioned dog was placed into the same box, it immediately jumped to the other side of the fence when it was shocked. The results show that the conditioned dog not only learned to associate the bell sound to the shock, but also learned that it could not escape the consequence regardless of its

efforts. This is a phenomenon Seligman coined **learned helplessness**. Even when faced with an option to escape, the dog did not make any attempts to move. While Seligman’s experiment has often been used to explain depression, it is also valuable in the context of trauma. Victims of trauma such as sexual and domestic abuse are often asked why they did not tell someone about the abuse they were enduring or try to escape. Just like the dogs in this experiment, these victims learn to feel helpless and lose hope of being capable of escaping their trauma. They are conditioned to feel worthless and guilty, as if the trauma is a consequence of their own actions and there is nothing they can do to stop it.

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