Worksheet 4.1

Example answer to short answer question 3 (Chapter 4)

This model answer is a guide for students in terms of structure and content. It represents above-average work.

3 Describe the role of one factor influencing conformity.  [8 marks]

I am going to describe how group decision-making is affected by the requirement that a consensus is reached. This is a common factor in several settings (e.g. organizations). In the context of the phenomenon of group polarization, such a requirement magnifies the conformity pressures within the group.

The pertinent question is: Do individuals working as a group and asked to reach consensus make riskier decisions than the same individuals working on their own?

Wallach et al. (1962) addressed precisely this question. They asked their participants to complete the Choice Dilemmas Questionnaire. This involves a series of 12 stories – the main character in each story faces a dilemma with two options, one of which is riskier than the other. An example of such a dilemma is that of a low-ranking chess player facing a highly favoured opponent in an early match. The low-ranking player has the choice of attempting or not attempting a deceptive but risky manoeuvre that might lead to quick victory if it is successful or almost certain defeat if it fails.

During the first phase of the experiment, participants worked individually. In a second phase they met in a group and, for each of the dilemmas, were asked to arrive at a unanimous decision. Wallach et al.’s findings indicated that the options chosen in the group condition were riskier than those chosen by the individuals working alone.

The phenomenon demonstrated by Wallach et al. was initially called the ‘risky shift’ – a term that refers to the tendency for group discussions to produce riskier decisions than those reached by group members working on their own. However, later research demonstrated that group decisions are not inevitably riskier: the risky shift is an example of the wider phenomenon of ‘group polarization’. Group polarization refers to the tendency of groups to make decisions that are more extreme than the decisions their members make when working individually. For example, Myers and Bishop (1970) found that groups of racial liberals became more liberal on race-related issues following discussion. Groups of racial conservatives, on the other hand, became more conservative.

The relevance of group polarization research for conformity is clear. A strong, and often explicit, need to reach consensus (perhaps coupled with a preference within the group for the same side of an argument) intensifies conformity pressure. Given such preconditions, both informational and normative influences are intensified.