

To Follow The Flow Or Take Your Own Road:
How Individuals Conform with their Peers versus Non-Peers

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Abstract

This paper challenges the ideas of conformity in today's society. Conformity is usually seen to have a negative connotation, but what most people do not think about are the positives that go along with it. Conformity allows for agreement and is used in our everyday lives whether one realizes it or not. The hypothesis proven in this paper states: If someone is surrounded by familiar people from their peer groups then they will be less susceptible to conform. How someone conforms and the reasons they conform, will be discussed as well as evaluated. The findings of the experiment used show a higher rate for social individuality compared to social conformity. The data also concludes that individuals feel more confident when not only surrounded by their peers, but also strangers. The thought that most people go with the flow, is proven to be false and instead people decide to express their individuality.

Lit Review/Intro

The idea of conformity¹ has long been an underlying issue in society. People make decisions based upon others around them, whether they realize it or not. Everyone has a unique moral compass that can be changed and altered due to others perceptions. In this paper, the idea of conformity inside peer groups and strangers will be addressed. This research is relevant today because people believe that relationships affect conformity to the people around them.

¹ Conformity can be defined as some behavioral or attitudinal change that occurs as a result of some real or imagined group pressure.

Meanwhile, others believe that individuality² rather than conformity, emerges when in peer groups. Recent studies have shown that moral judgment is swayed heavily by surrounding peers.³ This study shows significance by conforming that peers do persuade others to either conform or become more individual. These two ideas will be put to the test in order to see how people conform when in a situation with either peers or strangers.

A variation of one of the well known conformity studies by Solomon Asch will be used in this paper. Asch's research required participants to choose which of three lines of different lengths matched the length of an original line. Participants then made decisions in a group which included six to eight people, and all but one person was aware of the experiment.⁴ Through this redesigned experiment, the idea that relationships influence someone's ability to conform to the people around them will be shown and tested. The hypothesis being tested states: If someone is surrounded by familiar people from their peer groups then they will be less susceptible to conform.

Germar et al, (2016:1-2) states that humans' decisions are strongly influenced by the opinions of others, even when making simple everyday decisions. Most people are unaware that the process of conformity happens to them. When an individual begins to find a friend group they are swayed in ways they don't even know. For example, a young lady comes into high school as a shy sweet girl who easily make friends. She begins to make friends and these individuals begin to alter her personality. She starts to become more outgoing and expresses her

² Individuality is the state or quality of being an individual; particularly of being a person separate from other people and possessing their own needs and goals.

³ Germar, Markus. et al. (2016). Social conformity is due to biased stimulus processing: electrophysiological and diffusion analyses, *Oxford Academic*. 11(9).

⁴ Kundu, P. Dellarosa Cummins, D. (2012). Morality and conformity: The Asch paradigm applied to moral decisions, *Social Influence, Psychology Press*. 8(4).

opinions. This situation is useful to better understand conformity in today's society. The average person is unaware that they are affected by the underlying issue of conformity, which groups use in order to fit in. High Schoolers come into high school thinking they know who they are but are heavily influenced by others around them.

Recent studies have shown that social influence can stimulate activity in brain areas associated with reward processing.⁵ When an individual begins to conform to a group's expectations and personalities, they are rewarded with gestures such as laughing or agreement. The results suggest that the opinion of others can cause individuals to selectively process⁷ information supporting opinions, therefore inducing social conformity.⁸ Germar et al'. (2016) research helps to better understand how someone's social surroundings contribute to the factors of conformity.

Furthermore, other recent studies have shown that moral judgment can be strongly swayed by other factors. People judge actions as morally wrong if they are to feel they conflict with their own values.⁹ People usually chose their peers based on similar beliefs and morals. Kundu, P. Dellarosa Cummins, D. (2012: 3-4) suggest that there is a moral compass¹⁰ involved in decision making. People's judgements are based on moral rules supporting the statement that there is such thing as a moral compass. People gravitate towards others who they can connect with and relate to. Showing how this compass is used to lead one towards people who are more like them while also directing them away from conflicting others. Kundu, P. Dellarosa Cummins,

⁵ Germar, Markus. et al. (2016:7-8).

⁶ A group of brain structures responsible for motivation and "wanting", desire, or craving for a reward.

⁷ The means by which individuals' preexisting beliefs shape their use of information in a complex environment.

⁸ Germar, Markus. et al. (2016:11-12).

⁹ Kundu, P. Dellarosa Cummins, D. (2012:9-10).

¹⁰ Used in reference to a person's ability to judge what is right and wrong and act accordingly.

D. (2012: 6-7) research shows a strong conformity effect, which indicates that moral decision making is strongly influenced by one's social context and moral compass.

Recent research shows that people tend to conform to others not just for information or social approval, but for pursuit of positive emotion.¹¹ This also creates a negative emotion when conflicted with others. Rongjun, Y. Sun, S. (2013: 12-13) shows that humans are highly susceptible to social influence. When going against groups a more unpleasant or conflicting feeling is felt whereas going with the group is more rewarding or acceptable. They further go on to say:

When an individual's judgment conflicts with a group, the individual often conforms his judgment to that of the group. This ubiquitous phenomenon that individuals change their behaviors and attitudes to match the majority's behavior is known as social conformity. Depending on individual's intrinsic motives behind their behavior, there are two main types of conformity. If people rely on others to determine what is correct to do in uncertain contexts, it is referred as informational conformity. In other situations, if people adjust their behaviors in order to 'fit in' with the majority, this underlying form of social influence is called normative conformity. Informational conformity is concerned with accuracy and the search for information about reality, whereas normative conformity is concerned with social interaction. In normative conformity, individuals may not change their own opinions but simply change their behavior under social pressure.¹²

This research excerpt helps to fill in some of the gaps between the relationship of conformity and people in groups. Rongjun, Y. Sun, S. (2013: 12-13) help to show the parallel between individuals and their perception of the people around them. This research brings up the two different types of conformity: Informational and Normative. With the knowledge of these two types of conformity one can better understand why people conform in the different groups and situations that they do.

¹¹ Rongjun, Y. Sun, S. (2013). To Conform or Not to Conform: Spontaneous Conformity Diminishes the Sensitivity to Monetary Outcomes, *PLoS ONE*. 8(5).

¹² Rongjun, Y. Sun, S. (2013: 1-2).

Groups have their own identity and characteristics, separate from the identity of its individual members¹³. The key to understanding conformity is to understand the role of groups and the individuals within it. Sanaria, Apurva. (2004:4-5) shows that the individuals in a group exhibit behaviors, values, attitudes or other patterns that are similar or acceptable to other group members. Individuals in groups often seek the acceptance of other in the group, therefore creating the concept of conformity.

Sanaria, Apurva. (2004:7-8) brings in the topic of group cohesiveness¹⁴ and how it has long been considered an important element of group dynamics. With the idea of group cohesiveness comes group norms¹⁵. Group norms help to establish acceptable behavior by making each individual conform to these ideas. These norms help to signify the shared values, attitudes and ideologies of a group or community¹⁶. Individual norms are shaped and influenced by those who surround someone. Every group has influence over individuals for the enforcement of group norms. The individual then decides whether to conform or not. This unseen source of conformity helps researchers to better understand just how powerful group influence can be.

Personality traits can cause people to resist group pressure resulting in independence¹⁷. The opportunity to conform may be desirable since the group's expectations are clear however, people show their very nature to stand out and assert their uniqueness rather than to conform¹⁸.

Goncalo, J. Duguid, M. (2011: 12-13) suggest a different perspective into conformity and its

¹³ Sanaria, Apurva. (2004). Conformity & Norms: The Individual Perspective, *Asia Academy of Management (AAOM) conference in, Shanghai, China*. 1(1).

¹⁴ Defined as the group members' affinity for one another and their desire to remain part of the group.

¹⁵ Patterns of behaviors (and cognitions) acceptable to the group members.

¹⁶ Sanaria, Apurva. (2004:7-8)

¹⁷ Goncalo, J. Duguid, M. (2011). Follow the crowd in a new direction: When conformity pressure facilitates group creativity (and when it does not), *Cornell University*. 1(1).

¹⁸ Goncalo, J. Duguid, M. (2011: 12-13).

counterpart, individuality. When in a familiar environment people feel safer to express their opinions and thoughts. Whereas in a strange environment, it is usually seen that most people will fall back and become quiet while also just “going with the flow.”

Think of it this way, someone is put into a random room full of people discussing a controversial issue. The average person would sit back and listen without giving their opinion for the fear of creating conflict. Switch the scene, someone is now put into a room with six of their peers and friends. They too are discussing a controversial issue. Goncalo, J. Duguid, M. (2011: 12-13) suggest that because the person is familiar with these surrounding people, they are more comfortable to express their opinions and promote their independent thoughts. However, even Asch’s classical experiments suggest that individuals sometimes respond to group pressure by remaining independent or reacting against the norm¹⁹. This idea will further be investigated through an experiment and eventually lead to an acceptance or denial of the hypothesis showing that someone is surrounded by familiar people from their peer group then they will be less susceptible to conform.

Methods

A variation of one of the well known conformity study by Solomon Asch was used for this research. This experiment was chosen in order to better understand the conformity among individuals when surrounded by their peers versus strangers. There were two different types of groups used during this experiment a Control group²⁰, which will also be called the confederates

¹⁹ Goncalo, J. Duguid, M. (2011: 19-20).

²⁰ The people pretending to be a participant during the experiment but who are actually working with the researcher.

²¹, and the Experiment group²², which will be called the individual or participant. Nine waves of participants and confederates were tested during this experiment. Participants were chosen based on their relationships to the confederates. Two students and a teacher were used as confederates. These confederates knew the experiment and all the details behind it. The participants were told that they were being tested for visual perception in order to keep the true conformity study from the participants. This level of deception was necessary to keep the option of conformity open. This also helped to employ that the data was not compromised. Afterwards, Participants were debriefed and asked about their experience during this research.

An image was created that involved three different colored circles with them overlapping in order to create different colors. Each color was labeled with a number for reference when the individuals were asked to answer questions. These questions were comprised of single digit and double digit answers as well as critical thinking. Each individual was asked seven questions in reference to this diagram. The first two questions were agreed upon by most subjects but after this, the confederates had different answers from what one would expect them to answer. Thus, forcing the individual to choose between conforming to these answers and sticking to their own.

Each participant had their own response document that was facing down. This was done in order to secure the facade that everyone was being experimented on. The confederate's paper had answers in light grey text in order to assure they all stayed within the script's protocol. Each confederate was to follow a script that the researcher had deliberately made for them, where they would read answers from the back of the room to the front. The individual was given a different paper than them that was blank but was the same setup that the confederates had. Once

²¹ In this context, a person one works with, especially in something secret; an accomplice.

²² The person who is actually being tested

given instructions, each member flipped over their paper before the experiment began. The purpose of these papers helped with data collection and allowed the researcher to see if any answers had been changed. After the experiment ended, the individual was debriefed in order to get their feelings on the experiment.

This experiment had many variables including that of speaking. Each member was told not to speak until instructed to do so in order to isolate the individual from the other confederates. This variable helped the individuals to be truly alone with themselves and their thoughts. Without suppressing this variable, the results would have been inaccurate. The independent variable was the existence of the individual's relationship to the confederates. In this experiment individuals were chosen based on their relationship to the confederates. The researcher and the confederates picked groups of individuals who they did or did not know eventually leading them to also pick figures of higher power to test. This was used in order to create variety within the sample. The dependent variable was that of conformity and whether the individual chose to conform or not. These variables helped to better understand the social pressure behind conformity.

Results/Data

This results of this experiment suggest that individuals respond differently to group pressure based on factors of group makeup. This paper's hypothesis, which argued that someone who is surrounded by familiar people from their peer group would be less susceptible to conform was able to be proven with a few exceptions. Nine individuals were chosen based on their relationships to the confederates. This helped to better decipher the conformity between strangers

and friends²³. The individuals who were categorized as strangers had little to no knowledge of the confederates meanwhile those categorized as friends knew the confederates well.

To determine whether participants showed a general conformity effect, researchers first analyzed the percentage of choosing to conform. If participants moral judgements were swayed by the confederates opinions making them change their answers to match those of the confederates, they were considered to conform to the group. 33%, or three out of the nine participants in this experiment, conformed to the group around them. Two of the individuals were comfortable and personally knew the confederates. Meanwhile, the other individual was a stranger to the confederates making feel uncomfortable and alone. These three individuals were observed to question themselves and their thoughts, thus proving that the opinions of others truly do influence others.

The other 67% of the individuals chose to pursue their individuality rather than to conform to the confederates. Two of these individuals were classified as strangers meanwhile the four others were classified as friends. During debriefing interviews, three of these participants expressed that they refused to follow the confederates answers because they felt they were correct and didn't want to conform just because all the confederates had the same answers. These participants help to better understand how relationships affect the rate of conformity as well as individuality.

As predicted, the individuals who personally knew the confederates were less susceptible to conform. Out of the nine participants, six expressed that they personally knew the confederates and would consider them more than acquaintances. Out of these six, five

²³ See graph 1

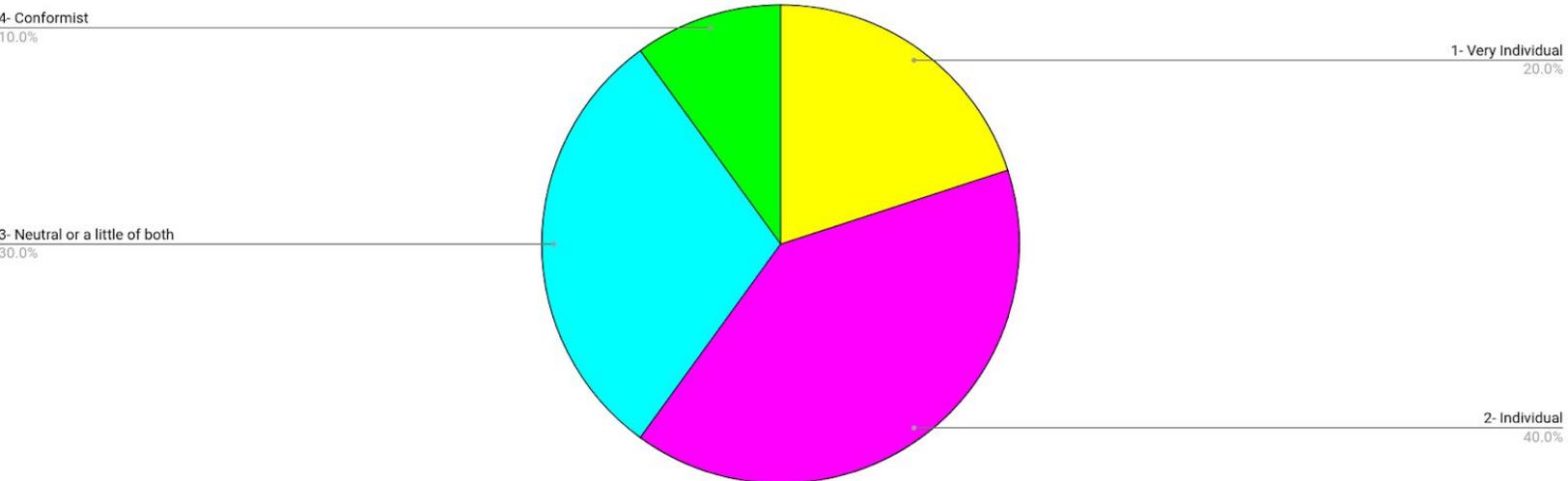
individuals did not conform and instead followed their individuality. During their debriefing, each one of these individuals expressed that they did not want to conform to the group because they believed in their answers and what they saw. These individuals were asked a follow up question concerning why they decided to keep their individual answers. The most common response included the idea that these individuals believed that they were right. This research proves that when one is surrounded by familiar people they chose to express individuality rather than conformity.

After each participant finished with the experiment, they were asked to stay for a quick briefing. This debriefing allowed researchers to better understand the thoughts of these individuals while they went through the process of this experiment. Through this debriefing, researchers were able to find themes among the participants. 77% of participants expressed that they felt feelings of confusion and numbness throughout the experiment²⁴. This was caused by the confederates and their answers. 66% of participants were observed to be nervously glancing around while the confederates gave their answers aloud. The individuals who did not conform expressed that they understood the confederates had different answers but they decided to stick to their own answers.

²⁴ Refer to the table below

Relationship to confederates	Debriefing Question 1: Rating themselves on a likert scale	Debriefing Question 2: Why individuals felt they did/didn't conform	Debriefing Question 3: How individuals felt when the group members said their answers	Debriefing Question 4: Did it help the individual better understand social pressure behind conformity
Individual 1- Stranger	Rated self 1- Strongly Individual	He didn't conform because he was sure of himself and wasn't going to with their wrong answers.	He felt like they were dumb because he knew what he was seeing was correct.	He wasn't sure if this helped him better understand the social pressure because he is a strong individual person who doesn't just "go with the flow".
Individual 2- Stranger	Rated self 2- individual	She felt she conformed because she wasn't sure what was actually happening and they seemed to have the right answers.	She felt good once the group revealed their answers.	She felt like this did help her better understand the social pressure behind conformity.
Individual 3- Stranger	Rated self 3- Neutral of both	He didn't conform because he believed he was right.	Felt like he was right and just noticed that he didn't have the same answers.	He felt like this helps him better understand the social pressure behind conformity.
Individual 4- Friend	Rated self 3- Neutral or a little of both	Was confused on how they saw the colors.	She felt she was color blind when the others began to reveal their answers.	She felt like this kind of helped her understand the social pressure behind conformity.
Individual 5- Friend	Rated self 2- Individual	She did what she saw and did not want to say their answers.	She felt she was dumb because they were all giving different answers.	She felt this definitely helped her better understand the social pressure behind conformity.
Individual 6- Friend	Rated self 1- Very Individual	Thought his answers were correct because of his placement in the room.	Felt like he had the wrong answers because all the others were seeing the same thing.	He felt like this did help him better understand the social pressure behind conformity.
Individual 7- Friend	Rated self 3- Neutral or a little of both	She kept with her answers because she knew she was right and didn't want to say the answers just because other people were.	She felt really stupid and thought she was missing something and was wrong and then caught on a little bit.	She believed this did her better understand the social pressure behind conformity because she was very nervous and didn't know what was going on
Individual 8- Friend	Rated self 2- Individual	Stuck with her answers because it was what she saw.	Felt she was looking at it differently and was interested in seeing it how the others did.	She felt this did help her understand the social pressure behind conformity.
Individual 9- Friend	Rated self 2- Individual	Stuck with her answers because it was what she saw but believed it looked different from their side of the room.	She felt confused because she was seeing something completely different from the others.	She felt this kind of helped her better understand the social pressure behind conformity.
Individual 10- Friend	Rated self 4- Conformist	Felt he didn't conform because he was smart.	He couldn't understand what the group was doing and thought he misunderstood the directions.	He felt this experiment would have helped him better understand if he was surrounded by other peers

Individual's Conformity Rating Based on a Likert Scale



One of the most interesting questions of this debriefing had to do with a Likert scale²⁵.

The scale used in this experiment was the following: 1- Very Individual, 2- Individual, 3- Neutral or a little of both, 4- Conformist, and 5- Very Conformist. Individuals were asked to rate themselves to show how conformist or individual they felt they were as a person. Chart 2 above shows the percentages of each option chosen by the individuals on the scale. Option 5- Very Conformist does not appear because none of the participants felt they were extremely conformist. Through the Likert Scale, 60% of participants expressed that they felt they were on the individual end of the scale. This corresponds to the experimental data which showed that 67% of the participants chose to pursue their individuality.

²⁵ A five point scale which is used to allow the individual to express how much they agree or disagree with a particular statement.

Discussion

In this study, researchers demonstrated that social conformity occurs even when little pressure and instructions were present. The data collected helps to support the hypothesis: If someone is surrounded by familiar people from their peer groups then they will be less susceptible to conform. Of the six individuals who considered the confederates friends or familiar peers, five choose to accept their individuality rather than follow the conformity. This research helps to support the hypothesis and proves that when surrounded by familiar peers people feel like they can express their individuality.

In this study, one critical point shows that participants made their own choices before knowing others' choices. Unlike previous studies where participants had to make choices in the presence of a group or peer, the manipulation used reduced individuals' responsibility of being the same as the confederates. They were in an isolated environment where they were able to choose whether to conform or not. Also, the group choices had been already planned out, further reducing the social pressure to conform. The relationships between individuals and confederates influenced individuals' decisions. There was little incentive to gain social approval or avoid social conflicts in this experiment with the ratio of 1:4²⁶.

Nine individuals were chosen based on their relationships to the confederates. This was used as a way to distinguish the data between strangers and friends, which was needed in order to prove the hypothesis stated above. With this distinction, categorizing the data was much easier in

²⁶ The ratio of Individuals to Confederates during the experiment.

order to create the table above. This table is categorized into 5 columns with headings to show the individual's responses below.

The analysis that 33%, or three out of the nine participants in this experiment, conformed to the group around them proves the point that less than 50% of individuals followed the confederates opinions. This shows that the percentage of conformity in today's society is diminishing. Individuals are being pushed to express themselves outside rather than to follow the flow of people. The table is able to prove this by showcasing the responses of the individuals who took part in this experiment. This was most helpful to portray the many different emotions and answers that researchers encounter during this experiment.

The table shows each individual's specific answers to the debriefing mentioned in the data section. This was used to give insight into each individuals exact feelings and answers that were given during the debriefing. The pie chart correlates with the table to better show the individuals ratings of themselves. The pie chart shows that 60% of participants chose to pursue their individuality which further proves the thought that individuality is beginning to be pushed and conformity is starting to dwindle.

The debriefing also asked the question: Do you believe this experiment helped you to better understand the social pressure behind conformity? This questions was asked in order to make participants think about those individuals who conform in their everyday life. Most participants did agree that this experiment helped them better understand this and after the debriefing, some even expressed that it helped them understand why they do it in certain situations.

This supported hypothesis plays out in many ways in daily life. The ability to not conform to others around you and express your opinions can be very useful in job situations. One who is able to express their ideas rather than conform to others ideas, will be positively affected in the work world. Being able to express your opinions is good for the betterment of a workplace. Employers sometimes look for improvements that need to be made and being able to be open and willing to explain ideas is crucial.

While this can be very important, the skills of listening and holding back your opinions is very important as well. Too often do people find themselves in situations that they wouldn't have been in if they would have kept their thoughts to themselves. Conformity is a necessary thing to keep today's society functioning. If we lived in a world where everyone constantly spoke their mind chaos would constantly be occurring. People are called out for being people pleasers or loud mouths in today's world. The research done in this experiment helps to better understand that those who consider themselves more outgoing are usually okay with going against the norm. Whereas. those who would rather blend in with the crowd take the route of conformity.

Researchers demonstrated a behavioral conformity effect that showed when peer pressure and group opinions are available, individuals choose whether to conform or not. Conformity choices activate feelings of self-doubt or cooperation compared with independent choices which influence reassurance and strong wills, suggesting that conformity itself can be seen as both negative and positive. Some individuals in the world are more independent than others, while others are more shy and able to conform. Conformity has long been a controversial topic in the world. While some believe conformity is showing weakness, conformity can also be considered

a positive reinforcement that protects us from experiencing negative emotions when outcomes do not go as planned.

Conclusion/Limitations

In this experiment, researchers could not use a true random sample of the students at Freeport High School and therefore had to use a convenience sample. The individuals used were chosen by researchers based on convenience and limited knowledge of every student in the school. A true random sample would be used if students were randomly chosen from a list of all students attending Freeport High School.

The use of recording was one of the most influential limitation. Researchers tried to hide the camera while also having a good view of the individuals. Some of the individuals were able to see the camera and eventually caught on to what researchers were doing. This was a limiting factor because individuals truly weren't able to conform to the best of their ability while having a camera focused on them.

Time was also a limitation when conducting this experiment. With multiple snow days and getting out of school early because of being seniors, time was on a very restricted schedule. The limitation of time only allowed nine individuals to be tested. With more time, more individuals would have been able to participate in this experiment. This would allow for more data to better prove this hypothesis.

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