

# **Conforming Behaviour Among Teenagers**

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## **Background**

Conformity has been a feature of human groupings for millennia, dating back to the earliest societies. It is expected that people will follow certain social norms. For instance, in most societies, it is considered rude to stare intensely at strangers, or to sit right next to the only person on an empty bus, speak rudely to people for no reason, and so on. Social conformity operates when an individual's values, beliefs, behaviors, and/or attitude are influenced by either one person (minority influence), or by a group of people (majority influence) who establish norms. Even just going to school every morning is conforming. It is natural for most people to want to fit in, particularly with those close to us, which is why we often adopt speech and behaviour patterns of friends and family. Over time, often without even noticing it, we can slowly shift our opinions, attitudes, and so on, to fit theirs. Many people will blindly follow a crowd, for fear of getting something wrong, or experiencing opprobrium. This can happen between just a few individuals, but it is far more powerful when done in a larger group. Solomon Asch, in his legendary and highly influential conformity studies, determined that groups of four or more could exert considerable forces against individuals, sharply so if the group is unanimous. (Asch, 1951).

As for the present study, the researcher will be conducting an experiment on people's need for social acceptance and to do what they're seemingly expected to do in social situations. The researcher will have five participants seated in a room, with three of those five being secret participants (confederates). The researcher will then sound a buzzer (or a loud beeping noise,

depending on what's available). The confederates will then stand up all at once at the sound of the buzzer, after which the researcher simply sees how the two participants react. After viewing and noting their reactions, the researcher will give them some promised candy as thanks for participating, and send them on their way.

### **Review Of Literature**

Bond and Smith (1996) conducted a meta-analysis on studies aiming to replicate Asch's line judgment task to find out whether conformity levels have changed over time, and if it is related cross-culturally to individualism-collectivism. They reviewed 133 studies from 17 different countries. Collectivist countries, for example Japan, Hong Kong, and Fiji, had higher general conformity than individualist countries. They found that the reviewed literature provided no clear evidence that cultural conditions are systematically related to conformity. They also found that conformity in North America has decreased over time. They point to overarching societal changes such as the explosion of anti-war protests during the Vietnam era. This and other protest movements by their very nature challenged authority by demanding that governments justify the use of violence internationally and domestically. An important criticism of the corpus of research they reviewed was that explanations for cross-cultural differences were often post hoc, and direct assessment of any of the intervening variables that could mediate the level of conformity.

Venkatesan (1966) conducted an exploratory study involving male college students with an aim to gain insight into the effects of restricted choices and group pressure in the consumer decision making process. Most of the time laboratory experiments on group influence create artificial situations not present in everyday buying. In this case the authors created a laboratory

situation in which the consumer decision making process would resemble that of an actual buying situation. The participants' task was to pick the best suit to wear among three suits. The suits were identical in style, size, and colour. Any other means of identification had been removed. The positions of the suits were varied using Latin square design, so that each suit appeared with equal frequency in each position. The participants were told four things: 1) That each suit was from a different manufacturer, 2) that there were quality differences between the suits, 3) that in previous experiments experienced tailors and clothiers were able to pick the best one, and 4) that the current study was focused on finding out if consumers were able to pick out the best one. They created three conditions for the experiment: Condition I was a Control Condition. Conditions II and III were referred to as Conformity Condition and Reactance Condition, respectively, and were used to manipulate group pressure. In Conditions II and III, the suits were evaluated in a face to face group containing four individuals, three confederates and one subject. The confederates had been instructed to pick suit B as the best suit. The participants were seated around a table, and explained the instructions. After being allowed to examine the suits for two minutes, the participants were seated. The confederates were previously instructed to seat themselves so that the participant would always be the last to answer. In Condition I, the participant was given a form to write their answer on, eliminating any group influence on their decision. In Condition II, each confederate unanimously stated loudly, clearly, and confidently that suit B was their choice. In Condition III, the conditions were very similar to Condition II. The difference was in the confederates' answers. They were very uncertain, and given off as if they were just going along with the first confederate's answer, who was very uncertain sounding themselves. The results of these experiments were as follows: In the Control Condition, with the

absence of any group influence, each suit was just as likely as any other to be chosen as the best. In the Conformity Condition, conformity towards the group norm was greater than one third, thus group influence is effective, and individuals tend to conform towards the group norm. In the Reactance Condition, the participants tended to be indifferent or actually try to make a decision that would negate the group effect.

Researcher John G. Adair, from the University of Manitoba, researched the role of the experimenter bias, participants attitudes towards psychology experiments, and the suspiciousness of deception in conformity research were examined in a judgemental task. Because the researchers wanted informational and normative influence to be exerted upon the participants so they felt more similar and attracted to one another, they told participants that the people they were grouped together with were based off of whether they had similar, or dissimilar attitudes. It was predicted that when participants were grouped together with people who they believed to have similar attitudes, they trusted in them more as a reliable source of external information about the outside world, and conformity was higher. The experiment consisted of 6 researchers, all advanced undergraduate psychology majors, 3 male and 3 female, and 87 participants, 44 male and 43 female. All participants and researchers were students at the University of Manitoba. All the experimenters performed each treatment combination to an equal number of male and female participants, permitting analysis according to the sex of the researcher and participants. Data was collected in 6 sessions, with 4 experimenters to 16 participants. Participants were arranged into groups of 4, and assigned an experimenter, who told them that they were put into groups together based on their views on contemporary issues. In truth, they were actually grouped together randomly, with the only requirement be that genders in each

group were equal. In the similar attitudes condition, the participants were told that they were with people who shared similar views. In the dissimilar conditions, the participants were told that this congruence failed and could not be achieved, and that they were grouped with people who had dissimilar attitudes. The participants took a test that resulted in their measured levels of conformity. The researchers were then told that each participant had been assigned a title, either conformist or non-conformist, based on their test scores; in truth the titles had been assigned randomly. The dot estimation task of Wyer was used. The experimenters had them repeat it, since accuracy improves with practice, and so that answers would be based on conformity, rather than chance fluctuation. Participants were told to look at their previous judgment before making their new one. After Trial 3, participants were given an intervening task, while the experimenter prepared new data sheets that contained the conformity pressure of the average group estimates of the number of dots, as well as each of the participant's responses for Trial 3, and a place to record their final estimates. Participants were instructed to look at their previous response in Trial 3 as well as the group average before making their estimations on Trial 4. At the end of the experiment the participants were given an open ended questionnaire to determine their suspiciousness of deception. The results of the experiment were, experimenters testing participants of the opposite sex had higher conformity in participants they expected to conform, rather than participants they expected to not conform. In participants of the same sex, the effect was reversed.

People like to conform. They have a need to do it. They want to be accepted by society, not rejected and shunned; so, they go along with the crowd, with a fear of messing up and doing something socially incorrect. These experiments focused on conformity, this driving factor for all

of us, forcing us from behind the scenes to do things that we may be confused about or even, in some cases, unwilling to do, just so that we can fit in. People definitely conform to group pressure far more than they do to an individual. If there's one person telling them to do something they really don't want to do, they may just shrug it off and tell them to go away. But if there's a whole group of five or six people? Now, that's a different story. In the first study, we saw compiled research of all a multitude of conformity studies, analyzing the data in them and summarizing it all. In the second, they performed an experiment analyzing conformity between college students in a shopping situation. In the third, they ran an experiment studying conformity between genders, with biased experimenters due to false information purposely given to them. All of them were conclusive in their results, and most people conformed heavily.

### **Methods**

The researcher enlisted the help of the psychology teacher in obtaining participants for the study by having him make a public announcement, and offering candy as a payment for participation. Three of them were trained to be working with the researcher, otherwise referred to as confederates, and appeared to be regular participants. They were already in the room when the other participants arrived. The researcher waited for two random participants to arrive, at which point they were asked to be seated in the front of the classroom, all adjacent to one another. The researcher then stood behind the psychology teacher's desk and accessed a beeping device, which they kept hidden from the participants, that they activated at a high pitched tone. Upon the hearing of this tone, the confederates stood up, as they were instructed to do. The researcher recorded the reactions of the participants, gave them their promised candy, and dismissed them.

### **Data**

	# of participants	# of confederates	Did they stand up?
Experiment 1	2	3	No
Experiment 2	1	6	No

### **Discussion**

For the first experiment, the two participants seated themselves a fair distance away from any of the three confederates (who all seated themselves randomly across the room). They also seemed like friends, which likely reduced social pressures. When I sounded the cue, all the confederates stood up out of their seats. The participants were very confused, and asked if they were supposed to stand up, to which I gave no response. I began recording their reactions, and they whispered to each other. They were very confused as to what they were meant to do, and since they were friends sitting next to one another, they likely weren't feeling nearly as pressured as might otherwise be expected. For the next experiment, I brought in more confederates (six to be precise), and ended up having only one participant. Everyone sat down, with the confederates sitting in big clusters while the lone participant sat not far away from them. When I sounded the cue, everyone stood up except for the participant and one confederate, who missed the cue. When the confederate who missed the cue saw that everyone else stood up, they acted like they didn't know what was going on and slowly stood up, as if they were an unknowing participant



themselves. The participant was very confused, just like the two friends in the previous experiment. He mumbled to himself, wondering what he was supposed to do, but didn't stand up. I find both of these results very interesting. Unlike in previous experiments done that were similar to this one (like the Asch Conformity Experiment), where people conformed and stood up, agreed with the incorrect answer, and so on, in this experiment, instead of conforming, the participants were very confused, and did not conform. There are multiple things that could be the reason for this. They may be scared of doing something wrong so they just froze, they could be too confused to make a decision so they decide to wait it out, or they may simply not want to. Despite the reason, it's easy enough to say that times might have changed. Another thing we need to look at are the circumstances. First of all, they knew they were going into a psychology experiment, so that set the atmosphere for them. The participants also could have just been the type of people to resist doing what others say. I'm interested to see if adults were the ones standing up, and it was completely unexpected in a public place, would they have stood up? I was hoping to do a third experiment, but circumstances prevented that. If I were to have done another one, however, I predict that the outcome would be much the same as these previous two. The participant(s) would be confused, ask a lot of questions and ponder what they're supposed to do, and would not stand up.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it seems that young people today do not react the same way as they did 30 years ago. I can confidently say that the Asch Conformity Experiment would not hold up today with younger participants.

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