
The Nature Of Humans' Conformity

Conformity can be seen on a daily basis. The actions we take, the words we say, and even the way we think are all affected by conformity, whether it is because of the desire to have an accurate perception of reality or the desire to be accepted by others. To be more specific, these influences are called informational and normative conformity respectively. Either way, people conform to formal or informal groups because of these two reasons. Although conformity is an intangible subject, it is a major social phenomenon that can be distinguished into three types: compliance, identification, and internalization.

The definition of the term "conformity" is "behavior in accordance with socially accepted conventions" according to Oxford Living Dictionaries. This noun first appeared in the late Middle English and was originated from two different branches of dialect. One of them is the Old French word *conformite*, which is defined as "similarity, correspondence in form or manner" in 14c. "Conformity" also derived from the Late Latin word *conformis*, meaning "similar in shape" in the late 15c. Its synonyms include accordance, agreement, congruence, and congruity according to Merriam-Webster. Oppositely, disagreement, incongruence, and incongruity are its antonyms.

Although obedience is not one of the synonyms of conformity, these two concepts are usually closely related. Indeed, conformity and obedience are similar in several ways. For example, they are both kinds of social interactions, behaviors, and influences that can be seen in groups. Moreover, pressure and influence are present in both cases such that failure to meet others' expectations could lead to an isolation of oneself. Lastly, in both situations, the concept of majority and minority always exists. However, there are significant differences that mark a clear line between the two. For instance, conformity involves a voluntary attempt to fit in and to be correct, while obedience is a response to direct authority. Most significantly, the reasons to conform and to obey differ. One conforms because of the fear of rejection, while one obeys to a supreme power to avoid punishments or other negative consequences.

One of the aspects of conformity is compliance, which is a temporary change in one's behavior. Compliance, or group acceptance, is the lowest level of conformity that occurs when an individual acquiesces in the group norms in order to elicit a favorable reaction from a group. Nevertheless, compliance does not involve a change in one's private opinion but manifests itself in outward, perceivable self-expressions. The most prominent research on compliance is the Asch's Line Experiment that took place in 1951. Solomon Asch, an American psychologist, conducted an experiment that was designed to examine the extent to which social pressure from a majority could affect an individual to conform. There were a total of 50 male students

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from Swarthmore College in the US that participated in the experiment by taking the “vision test.” During the exam, there was only one naive participant in each room while all the other seven were confederates who took part in the experiment. These confederates had agreed in advance to choose an answer that was clearly wrong without telling the naive participant. Then, everyone in the room was given the task to point out which of the following lines A, B, and C was closest to the standard line segment that was on a separate card in terms of the length. The answer was obvious since line A was considerably shorter than the standard length, while line B was much longer than the standard length, leaving line C as the best choice. However, when everyone was asked to say their answers out loud, placing the real participant after all the other confederates on purpose, 32% went along with what the majority chose, which was clearly incorrect. In addition, on 12 out of the 18 trials, 75% of the participants conformed to the majority at least once, and only a quarter of the total participants were able to resist the group pressure and not conform. Surprisingly, more than 99% of the control participants gave the accurate answer when they were able to proclaim their judgments privately. The Asch’s Experiment demonstrates the first aspect of conformity, compliance, since these participants still believed in their own belief and only conformed on the outside to fit in with the norms when in public.

Another facet of conformity other than conforming to be accepted by a group is identification, which is the desire of belonging that motivates people to conform to the majority. It is the middle level of conformity and takes place when an individual accepts influence for the purpose of establishing or maintaining a satisfying status within a group. In other words, people conform to the expectations of social roles both publicly and privately in the presence of a group and reverts to his or her original self when the pressure to conform is gone. For example, Zimbardo’s Prison Study, which is also known as the Stanford Prison Experiment, proves the idea of identification. Philip Zimbardo, a Stanford psychologist, and his colleagues conducted an experiment that involved 21 volunteers, who were Stanford students in 1971. The goal of the experiment was to find out whether the ferocity shown in the actions among the guards in American prisons was due to the natural sadistic personalities of the guards or had to do with the environment. To create an ideal and fair condition, Zimbardo made sure that all participants had no criminal background and were mentally and physically healthy. Then, he randomly grouped them into two roles: the prisoners and the guards. The ten randomly chosen prisoners were confined in the simulated prison that was actually the basement of Stanford University’s psychology building. Unexpectedly, both the guards and the prisoners quickly identified their social roles; the guards became abusive, and the prisoners began to be passive and depressed. In fact, the more aggressive the guards became, the more submissive the prisoners were, which meant that the prisoners were identifying further with their inferior role. Most importantly, the concept of identification is evident when the researchers found out that during the experiment, 90% of the prisoners’ private conversations were on their thoughts about the prison conditions, showing that even their own private beliefs had been transformed. However,

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right after the experiment ended, prisoner #819 stopped crying suddenly and acted as if nothing had happened after having an emotional incontinence just seconds ago because of the harsh treatments in jail. All of these demonstrate identification taking part in human behavior since when they were still in the experiment, both their public and private conviction conformed to the social roles they are expected to play; yet, once the experiment ended, they were able to switch back to their initial mindset.

The German soldiers who took part in the Holocaust can be seen as a prominent example of identification, where they adjusted their mental in order to become what was considered a good soldier and a good German at that time. At first, the soldiers did not agree completely with the orders they received and did not develop a prejudice against Jews; however, once the soldiers were able to identify their roles in society, they quickly followed the orders that their commanders gave and started to believe that Jews were secondary. This horrific event in history demonstrates how ordinary people are capable of turning from good to evil once they recognize their own place in the society. In other words, when one is willing to change their behaviors and ideologies temporarily because of the acknowledgment of one's current social position, it is called identification.

Internalization is the deepest level of conformity and leaves permanent alterations to one's behavior. This is seen in Sherif's autokinetic experiment, where a Turkish-born social psychologist demonstrated the power of social influence to change people's personal view on various subjects. In the experiment, groups of three were asked to concentrate on a stationary point of light in a dark room that appears to move and to say out loud how far each one thought the point has travelled. Most of the time, participants perceived the movements differently, some thought it moved by a lot, while others thought it barely budged. Despite the differences in their opinions, every group formed a group norm about the distance the light shifted where they all gradually converged their judgments, which was usually close to the average of the answers given individually in private. Most importantly, Sherif ensured that internalization was taking place when individuals told them answers they came up with their groups even in private, when they were allowed to revert back to their initial judgments (Levine). And surprisingly, the influence from the group norms was still apparent a year later after the experiment. Lastly, it is essential to keep in mind that the Sherif's studies is different from the Asch's experiment because of its ambiguity and obscurity, which is the beliefs of the participants in the Sherif's experiments were easily changed

The film Pleasantville directed by Gary Rose proved that humans are constantly being influenced by TV shows and socials media unknowingly. As a result, we tend to pursue the kind of lifestyle we perceive on TV and other media, which means we are internalizing to the societal norms that are presented on these platforms. In the movie Pleasantville, we see Betty Parker, the mother of the main character, sobbing after divorcing because she is not living up to the

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expectations that are shown in TV, where women are supposed to be married and have a perfect family and home. To summarize the idea of internalization, it is simply when someone entirely transforms their attitudes and actions permanently because they believe that by adopting these beliefs, they will be in a more favorable position.

Conclusively, as a gregarious creature, humans crave for others' attention and affection, and conformity is simply the response people have towards a group. Although abstract in nature, conformity can be divided into three levels: compliance, identification, and internalization. The different degrees of conformity can be conceived as how deeply the social standards have embedded themselves in one's mind and can be measured by observing whether one's action in public matches up with his/her action in private. Although conformity is a normal phenomenon, people should never feel discouraged to be themselves and stand out from the group. As Ralph Waldo Emerson, an eminent American and transcendentalist, once wrote "to be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else, is the greatest accomplishment".

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