Definition: **Conformity** from *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*

Generally, the tendency to allow one's opinions, attitudes, actions and even perceptions to be affected by prevailing opinions, attitudes, actions and perceptions. There are at least three distinct subtypes: (a) *behavioural*, i.e. the tendency to 'go along with the group', to attempt to act in ways consistent with the majority; (b) *attitudinal*, i.e. the tendency to change an attitude or belief in response to pressure from others, which may or may not result in behavioural change; and (c) *personality trait*, i.e. the tendency for an underlying characteristic of an individual's personality to change under the influence of (a) or (b).

Summary Article: **Conformity**

*from Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*

President John F. Kennedy and several of his key advisers met in March 1961 to discuss a Central Intelligence Agency plan for the invasion of Cuba. The consensus of the group was to proceed with the invasion. At least one adviser, Arthur Schlesinger, had serious doubts about the wisdom of the plan, but he did not argue strongly for his position.

In a laboratory experiment, Solomon Asch brought together groups of college students and told them they would be participating in a study on visual perception. Their task was to match the length of a standard line against three comparison lines. This was easy to do, as only one of the comparison lines was the same length as the standard. Each group actually contained only one real participant. The other group members were confederates who had been instructed to give unanimously incorrect responses on most of the trials. The real participant responded next-to-last and hence was exposed to group pressure when the other members chose an incorrect comparison line. Asch also included a control condition in which participants made judgments privately, without any group pressure. He found that participants exposed to group pressure agreed with the erroneous majority approximately 33% of the time, whereas control participants made errors less than 1% of the time.

Both Schlesinger and the participants in Asch's experiment found themselves opposed by a unanimous group of peers. They were placed in a conflict between saying what they really believed and agreeing with the other members of the group. They resolved this conflict by conforming to the group.

**Definition**

*Conformity* occurs when a person changes his or her behavior or attitude to make it more similar to the behavior or attitude of a group. It is important to note that conformity can occur without the group desiring to exert influence on, or monitor, the individual, as long as the person knows the group position and wants to agree with it. In fact, it is not even necessary that the group be aware of the individual's existence. (For these reasons, the term *group pressure* is used to mean only that an individual perceives that a group disagrees with his or her position).

**Types of Conformity and Nonconformity**

Defining conformity as *change* toward a group is useful, because it implies that group influence has indeed occurred. That is, we would probably feel sure that a person was influenced by a group if he or
she initially disagreed with the group and then shifted toward it. This would be particularly true if other people who held the same initial position, but who were not exposed to group pressure, did not move toward the group position. In contrast, if we knew only that an individual currently agrees with a group, we would not be sure that group influence was the reason. The individual might have independently arrived at the group’s position without knowing what group members thought or desiring to be similar to them. Clearly, we would not want to define the widespread practice of wearing coats in winter as conformity, if, as seems more likely, people independently decide to wear coats to keep warm.

Although it is generally a good idea to define conformity in terms of change, this criterion can cause problems in certain cases. For example, a person might independently agree with a group position, be tempted to abandon this position, but maintain it because of group pressure. Here, conformity would be manifested by refusal to change. The change criterion is also problematical when people show delayed conformity (moving toward a group position long after group pressure occurs). In this case, it is hard to detect the relationship between group pressure and response to this pressure, even though the relationship exists.

Another important issue in defining conformity concerns the distinction between public and private agreement. Public agreement (or compliance) refers to the individual’s behavioral change toward the group position. For example, if the individual initially opposed abortion rights, learned that the group advocated abortion rights, and publicly went along with the group, the person would be showing compliance. Private agreement (or acceptance) refers to the individual’s attitudinal change toward the group’s position. For example, if the person’s private opinion toward abortion rights became more favorable after learning the group’s position, the person would be showing acceptance.

The distinction between public and private agreement is important, because it has implications for how a person will behave if the group is not present to monitor his or her behavior. Consider the case of an individual who conforms to the group at the public level but disagrees with its position at the private level. Because this response pattern is often produced by the desire for group acceptance, we would not expect the person to continue endorsing the group’s position if it were not present to monitor his or her behavior. In contrast, consider the case of an individual who conforms at both the public and private levels. This person, who apparently really believes in the position he or she is endorsing, would be expected to continue endorsing this position even if the group were not present.

Just as there are different forms of conformity, so there are different forms of nonconformity. Two of the most important are independence and anticonformity. Independence occurs when a person perceives group pressure but does not respond to it at either the public or the private level. Thus, an independent person “stands fast” when faced with disagreement, moving neither toward nor away from the group’s position. In contrast, anticonformity occurs when a person perceives group pressure and responds by moving away from it (at the public level, the private level, or both). Thus, an anticonformer becomes more extreme in his or her initial position when faced with disagreement. In a real sense, then, the anticonformer is just as susceptible to group pressure as is the conformer. The only difference is that the anticonformer moves away from the group, whereas the conformer moves toward it.

**Motives Underlying Conformity**

Why do people succumb to group pressure? Two major reasons have been proposed. The first is based on people’s desire to hold correct beliefs. Certain beliefs can be verified by comparing them
against an objective physical standard. For example, we can verify our belief that water boils at 100 degrees Celsius by placing a thermometer in a pan of water, heating the water, and reading the thermometer when the water begins to boil. In contrast, other beliefs (e.g., the United States should reduce its nuclear stockpile) cannot be verified against objective physical standards. To determine the validity of such beliefs, we must compare our beliefs with those of other people. If others agree with us, we gain confidence in the validity of our beliefs; if others disagree, we lose confidence. Because disagreement frustrates our desire to verify our beliefs, we are motivated to eliminate it whenever it occurs. One way to do so is to change our position toward the others’ position, that is, to conform.

This analysis suggests that when people are unsure about the validity of their beliefs and think the group is more likely to be correct than they are, they will conform to reduce uncertainty. In so doing, they will exhibit *informational influence*, which is generally assumed to produce private acceptance as well as public compliance. Informational influence is more common under some conditions than others. For example, people show more conformity when they are working on a difficult or ambiguous task, when they have doubts about their task competence, and when they think other group members are highly competent on the task. In such cases, it is not surprising that people feel dependent on others to validate their beliefs and conform as a result.

A second goal underlying conformity is the desire to be accepted by other group members. When people want to be liked and believe that other members will respond favorably to conformity (and unfavorably to nonconformity), they will conform to win approval. In so doing, they will exhibit *normative influence*, which is generally assumed to produce public compliance but not private acceptance. Consistent with this idea, evidence indicates that people who deviate from group consensus generally anticipate rejection from other group members. And they are often right. Group members do indeed dislike and reject people who refuse to conform. Not all deviates elicit the same amount of hostility, however. The amount of such hostility depends on several factors, including the extremity and content of the deviate’s position, the reasons that presumably underlie the deviate’s behavior, the deviate’s status, and group norms concerning how deviates should be treated.

Like informational influence, normative influence is more common under some conditions than others. For example, conformity is generally higher when group members are working for a common goal than when they are working for individual goals. This presumably occurs because people working for a common goal fear that deviance on their part will be seen as a threat to the entire group and hence will be severely punished. In contrast, people working for individual goals are less likely to assume that other members will be angered by (and hence punish) their deviance. It should be noted, however, that if members of common goal groups believe that conformity will hurt their group’s chances of reaching its goal, they conform very little.

A second factor that increases normative influence is surveillance by other group members. Because others can only deliver rewards and punishments based on one’s behavior if they observe this behavior, people ought to be more concerned about others’ reactions (and hence more likely to show normative influence) when their behavior is public rather than private. Consistent with this reasoning, people conform more when their responses are known to other group members than when they are not known.

**Reducing Conformity: The Role of Social Support**

Asch found that he could dramatically reduce conformity (i.e., increase independence) in his
experimental situation with a simple change in procedure—namely, by having a single confederate, who answered before the naive participant, dissent from the erroneous majority by giving correct responses. The presence of this social supporter reduced the total number of yielding responses from 33% to 6%. Additional research by Asch indicated that participants were far more independent when they were opposed by an eight-person majority and had a supporter than when they were opposed by a three-person majority and did not have a supporter. Later work by others showed that social support reduces conformity for many different kinds of people, including male and female adults and normal and mentally retarded children. Moreover, a social supporter’s ability to reduce conformity to group pressure continues even after the person leaves the situation, as long as participants judge the same type of stimulus after the supporter leaves and this person does not explicitly repudiate his or her dissenting position.

Why are social supporters so effective in conferring resistance to group pressure? The answer seems to be that they reduce the likelihood of informational and/or normative influence. Regarding informational influence, social supporters can lower participants’ dependence on the group for validating their beliefs. Thus, a supporter who is allegedly competent on the group task is more effective in reducing conformity than is a supporter who is allegedly incompetent. This presumably occurs because the competent supporter provides more credible support for the participant’s position. Regarding normative influence, social supporters can lower participants’ fear that they will be punished for deviance. As noted previously, people who dissent from group consensus alone (i.e., without a supporter) expect to be rejected. This fear is reduced, however, by the presence of a supporter who publicly agrees with their position. Fear of retaliation may decline because participants believe that the supporter will absorb some of the hostility that would otherwise be directed solely at them. A caveat is in order, however. If participants believe that group members are hostile to the supporter (e.g., because they are prejudiced against members of his or her race), they may be reluctant to “accept” his or her support and may continue to conform at a high level. This presumably occurs because participants expect that an alliance with a stigmatized supporter will elicit more, rather than less, punishment from the group.

Individual Differences: The Role of Culture

This discussion so far has implicitly assumed that a given group pressure situation has roughly the same impact on everyone who encounters the situation. That is, it has assumed that people who differ on such dimensions as age, race, sex, and cultural background respond similarly when facing group pressure. In fact, this is not the case, and individual differences can sometimes have powerful effects on the amount and type of conformity that people exhibit. To illustrate these effects, let’s consider how people’s cultural background affects their responses to group pressure.

People who grow up in different cultures have different socialization experiences, which may influence how they respond to group pressure. Researchers interested in the impact of culture on behavior often distinguish between two types of cultures: those that stress individualism and those that stress collectivism. Individualistic cultures emphasize independence, autonomy, and self-reliance. Collectivistic cultures emphasize interdependence, cooperation, and social harmony. In regard to the impact of culture on conformity, evidence indicates that people in collectivistic cultures conform more on Asch’s line judgment task than do people in individualistic cultures. This presumably occurs because people in collectivistic cultures place more emphasis on joint goals and are more concerned and affected by how others view their behavior than are people in individualistic cultures.
Conformity: Bad or Good?

The consequences of conforming to group pressure are worth considering, in light of the common belief that conformity is invariably harmful. In fact, however, conformity can have positive as well as negative consequences for the individual and the group.

From the perspective of the individual, conformity is often a rational and adaptive response. A person who desires to respond accurately to a complex and changing environment may be wise to rely on the judgments of others, particularly when they are more knowledgeable about the issue in question. Similarly, a person who desires to be liked and accepted (surely not an unusual goal for most people) will often find that conformity is a useful tactic for gaining acceptance.

Of course, conformity can have negative consequences for the individual as well. In some circumstances, the individual is more likely to be correct by maintaining his or her position than by going along with the group. Moreover, even though conformers are generally liked better than deviates, conformers may be rejected if they are viewed as slavishly agreeing to gain acceptance, and deviates may be respected for their courage in dissenting from group consensus. Conformity may also be maladaptive if the individual wishes to differentiate him- or herself from others to feel unique. Finally, a person who succumbs to group pressure may come to believe that he or she is weak and spineless, which in turn may reduce the person's self-esteem.

Not only from the individual's but also from the group's standpoint, conformity can have both advantages and disadvantages. All groups develop norms, or rules of proper behavior. Although the content of these norms varies across groups, no group can tolerate routine violation of its norms. Conformity to at least basic norms is essential if group members are to interact in a predictable manner and if the group is to survive and attain its goals. As in the case of the individual, however, conformity is not always advantageous for the group. Sometimes the norms that a group embraces do not change even though the circumstances that originally produced the norms have changed. In such cases, continued conformity can be harmful to the group, reducing its ability to attain its goals and even threatening its existence. In circumstances such as these, the group is better served by deviance directed toward satisfying its real needs than by conformity to outdated norms. Consistent with this reasoning, groups sometimes recognize the utility of deviance and reward “innovators,” who seem motivated to help the group and who facilitate the attainment of group goals.

As this discussion suggests, the question of whether conformity is bad or good is complex. The answer depends on knowledge of many specific factors that may vary from situation to situation, as well as value judgments about the relative importance of conflicting and often equally valid goals. Research on conformity is not sufficient by itself to resolve value questions. Nevertheless, such research provides information that helps us to pose these questions in an intelligent manner.

See also
Brainwashing; Bystander Effect; Collectivistic Cultures; Compliance; Deindividuation; Group Cohesiveness; Group Decision Making; Groups, Characteristics of; Informational Influence; Intergroup Relations; Leadership; Optimal Distinctiveness Theory; Power; Roles and Role Theory; Social Dominance Orientation

Further Readings

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