

CONFORMITY. THE INFLUENCE OF THE MAJORITY

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Conformity is a subject that psychologists have been investigating for almost half a century. Some of them think that this is some kind of a curse which we have to combat by all means, but others feel easier about it and prefer to investigate this phenomenon as something inevitable and immortal, trying to find out the reasons of it and situations when it can occur. So, let's start with the definition of conformity.

According to the Oxford dictionary of social sciences, conformity is the tendency to make one's actions comply with prevailing norms, irrespective of one's personal beliefs. In 1935 Muzafer Sherif, a famous Turkish social psychologist, who worked at Oklahoma University, the USA, was one of the first to conduct a classic study of conformity. Sherif put subjects in a dark room and told them to watch a pinpoint of light and report how far it moved. Psychologists had previously discovered that a small, unmoving light in a dark room often appeared to be moving. This was labelled the autokinetic effect. First Sherif studied how subjects reacted to the autokinetic effect when they were in a room by themselves. He found that they soon established their own individual norms for the judgment—usually 2 to 6 inches. In the next phase of the experiment, groups of subjects were put in the dark room, 2 or 3 at a time, and asked to agree on a judgment. Now Sherif noted a tendency to compromise. People who usually made an estimate like 6 inches or 2 inches soon made their judgments to like 4 inches. Sherif's subjects were not aware of this social influence. When Sherif asked subjects directly, "Were you influenced by the judgments of other persons during the experiments," most denied it. But they had increased their conformity to group norms, anyway.

In 1951 another famous psychologist Solomon Asch, an American Gestalt psychologist and pioneer in social psychology, also held an interesting experiment on conformity. For the experiment, eight subjects were seated around a table, with the seating plan carefully constructed to prevent any suspicion. Only one participant was actually a genuine subject for the experiment, the rest being carefully tutored to give certain pre-selected responses. The construction was simple; each participant, in turn, was asked to answer a series of questions, such as which line matched the reference line. The participants gave a variety of answers, at first correct, to avoid arousing suspicion in the subject, but then with some incorrect responses added. This would allow Asch to determine how the answers of the subject would change with the added influence of peer pressure. The Asch Experiment results were

unexpected and showed that peer pressure could have a measurable influence on the answers given. When surrounded by people giving an incorrect answer, over one third of the subjects also voiced an incorrect opinion. There have been a number of criticisms of Asch's experiments; the subjects were all young males. More mature people have had enough experience of life, and more mental strength; they are more likely to hold true to their convictions. But anyway, the results were really striking.

Later, in 2005 Gregory Berns, a distinguished American neuroeconomist, held a similar experiment as Asch. For his experiment he used 2 3D objects and asked 32 subjects whether they match or not. As in Asch's experiment the majority of the group was confederates who were told to give pre-selected numbers. It could seem amazing but the results were almost the same as in Asch's experiment, but Berns discovered that if conformity occurred at the level of perception the occipital brain area was expected to show activity, and if it occurred at the level of action or judgement Orbitofrontal Cortex was expected to show activity.

It should be pointed out that in general there are LOTS of human mechanisms that can work for or against us. Clearly, conformity has some advantages. It can give the society a convenient structure, predictability and can also create some helpful conventions. But conformity starts to be against us when we become tyrannised by the group opinion in areas, where this opinion shouldn't be the main for us. We can suddenly feel the loss of authentic self for no good reason. People, who can actually resist the public opinion and have their own point of view, form the minority, who struggle for freedom of mind and independence. But the paradox is that the opinion of that minority can be pressing either. So, everything starts from the beginning.

An interesting experiment showed that, for example, from a group of 10 people who say that their opinion is X, usually 1/3 has the opinion A. But they keep their point of view to themselves being afraid of social penalties, and so, they work for the statistics of the majority. But can you imagine how the social landscape could have changed if that minority wasn't afraid? Many people try to show that they're against conformity, they read a lot of "just do it" books, listen to auto trainings. But unfortunately, in fact, they don't DO anything, they don't change their behaviour. Also, the fear of disappointing people can play a great role and prevent us from free expression of our feelings, especially if those people are from a group that is very close to us.

I'd like to underline that sometimes we want to prevent confusion, we don't want to be laughed at or seem antisocial, but I beg of you: let's risk being more fully ourselves. Maybe we'll like THIS more!