9

Groups, norms, and conformity

What's it about?

(Social Psychology pp. 310–350)

This chapter is about how, when, and why people conform to group norms. People conform to group norms because of their need to master the world, and the need to be connected by others. Conforming to group norms satisfies our need for mastery, because people believe that consensus tells something about reality and gives us feelings of connectedness. This is because conforming to group norms results in attaining a positive and valued social identity, and in winning respect from other group members. Most groups initially lean in one direction and, after group discussion, the group's initial average position becomes more extreme.

Minority viewpoints can alter a group's consensus when they offer an alternative consensus, remain consistent, have a balance between similarity and difference from the majority, and promote systematic processing. Consensus is more likely to be accurate when group members are more critical and systematic processors as a group than as individuals, when majority and minority viewpoints are carefully considered, when all information is processed systematically, and when norms supporting dissent are adopted.

Chapter topics

- Conformity to social norms *(pp. 312–317)*

- The dual functions of conformity to norms: Mastery and connectedness *(pp. 318–324)*

- How groups form norms: Processes of social influence *(pp. 325–332)*

- Conformity pressure:Undermining true consensus *(pp. 332–339)*

- Minority influence: The value of dissent *(pp. 339–348)*

CONFORMITY TO SOCIAL NORMS

Ask yourself

- What is the influence of other group members' opinions on the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of an individual?
- What is the difference between privately and publicly conforming?
- Are there cultural differences in the views on **conformity** and the degree of conformity?

What you need to know

WHAT ARE SOCIAL NORMS? *(SP pp. 312–315)*
PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE CONFORMITY *(SP pp. 312–314)*

- The social neuroscience of conformity
- Conformity and culture

People are influenced by the reactions of other people. For instance, they rate jokes and slapstick routines as funnier, and laugh longer and louder, when they are accompanied by the laughter of an audience.

A basic premise of social life is that many people are wiser and can do better than one, and we trust committees and boards in their collective wisdom.

However, collectively taken decisions are not always the best decisions.

Groups seek to reach agreement and accept being influenced by others because of their need to master the world, and the need to be connected by others.

WHAT ARE SOCIAL NORMS?

(SP pp. 312–315)

Groups have influence on ambiguous (Sherif, 1936, see SP p. 309) and unambiguous situations (Asch, 1951, 1955, see SP p. 313); people often adopt the opinion of other group members and converge to social norms.

Weblink: More information on the conformity studies of Asch
www.age-of-the-sage.org/psychology/social/asch_conformity.html

These social norms reflect group evaluations of what is right and wrong.

Descriptive social norms are what a group of people think, feel, or do. **Injunctive social norms** are what people *should* think, feel, or do.

As a result of converging to groups' opinions, people become more alike when interacting in groups.

PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE CONFORMITY
(SP pp. 315–317)
Conformity is the term used for the convergence of individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behavior towards a group's norms.

Private conformity occurs when people truly believe that the group is right and even occurs in the absence of group members.

Public conformity occurs when we are pressured and feel we do not have a choice other than to conform to group norms. When publicly conforming, people pretend to agree, but privately think the group is wrong.

CASE STUDY: Conformity in kids: How early does it begin? [see ch09-CS-01.doc]

People can privately conform without realizing it.

The social neuroscience of conformity

Conformity has an influence on our brains and can influence our unconscious processing of visual information.

CASE STUDY: Your brain on conformity [see ch09-CS-02.doc]

Conformity and culture

In individualistic cultures, conformity is seen as something negative; whereas in collectivistic cultures, conformity is seen as a social glue. Accordingly, the degree of conformity is higher in collectivistic cultures than it is in individualistic cultures.

CASE STUDY: Conformity and culture [see ch09-CS-03.doc]

So what does this mean?

People conform to the opinion of other group members and converge to social norms, because of their need to master the world and the need to be connected by others. **Private conformity** occurs when people truly believe that the group is right, whereas **public conformity** occurs when we are pressured to conform to group norms. When publicly conforming, people still privately think the group is wrong. The degree of **conformity** is higher in collectivistic cultures, where they view conformity as a social glue, than it is in individualistic cultures, where conformity is seen as something negative.

MOTIVATIONAL FUNCTIONS OF CONFORMITY TO NORMS

Ask yourself

- Why are we influenced by other people's opinions?
- What makes the view of others so important?
- Why do we care what some people think, but not care about opinions of other people?

What you need to know

EXPECTING CONSENSUS *(SP p. 317)*
NORMS FULFILL MASTERY MOTIVES *(SP pp. 3185–320)*
NORMS FULFILL CONNECTEDNESS MOTIVES *(SP p. 320)*
WHOSE CONSENSUS? ME AND MINE NOMRS ARE THE ONES THAT COUNT *(SP pp. 32–324)*   • Reference group effects in food preference
MASTERY, CONNECTEDNESS, OR ME AND MINE? *(SP p. 324)*

EXPECTING CONSENSUS

(SP p. 317)

The key factor to **conformity** is the expectation of consensus; People tend to overestimate the extent to which others agree with their views. This is called the **false consensus effect**.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Expecting consensus [see ch09-RA-01.doc]

Weblink: More information about the false consensus effect

http://changingminds.org/explanations/theories/false_consensus.htm

People not only expect others to share their opinions, but views of others also influence people's opinions; we see the world the same way as others see it.

When views are shared, this agreement increases our confidence that we are seeing things correctly.

NORMS FULFILL MASTERY MOTIVES

(SP pp. 318–320)

People believe that consensus tells us something about reality. Conforming to group norms therefore satisfies our need for mastery.

When people privately conform because they believe group norms reflect reality, the group has *informational influence.*

When the stakes are high, people are even more motivated to make accurate decisions, and thus conform even more.

Breaking the consensus undermines the influence of the group. In addition, it undermines confidence in reality, and as a result we might feel confusion, anxiety, and uncertainty.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Replicating Milgram's other study [see ch09-RA-02.doc]

NORMS FULFILL CONNECTEDNESS MOTIVES

(SP pp.320–322)

Norms give us feelings of connectedness because conforming to group norms results in attaining a positive and valued social identity, and in winning respect from other group members. Confirming thus leads to experiencing a sense of belonging, and it demonstrates commitment to other group members.

A group has *normative influence* when people conform to fulfill their need for connectedness.

People who conform to group norms most strongly are more positively evaluated.

Consequently, when people do not conform to their group norms, it undermines the identity we derive from that group. People who conform feel happier than people who do not conform.

WHOSE CONSENSUS? ME AND MINE NORMS ARE THE ONES THAT COUNT

(SP pp. 321–324)

A **reference group** is the group of people you turn to when needing support for a decision or evaluation.

Because intellective tasks have a single answer, many people can serve as a reference group; however, when making judgmental decisions, people turn to those who have similar attitudes, values, and relationships.

People are more influenced by in-group members than by out-group members, because we do not expect to agree with out-group members or people we dislike.

Persuasive appeals from in-group members are more likely to be accepted, and are processed more systematically than appeals from out-group members. When messages from in-group members are strong, they are most likely to be accepted, while weak messages are most likely to be rejected. Messages from out-group members are most likely to be rejected, regardless of the quality of the argument.

Conformity to group norms occurs even when group members are not present, but the presence of group members increases conformity to group norms even more. The impact

of a group is also higher when members identify strongly with their group, and when the group interacts frequently and closely.

The reference group effects in food preference

When it comes to food choice, descriptive norms determine food consumption.

We are especially likely to eat (more of) a food if other in-group members have also eaten the food. We are less likely to eat a food if out-group members like the food.

CASE STUDY: You are what others eat [see ch09-CS-04.doc]

Mastery, connectedness, or me and mine?

When doing intellectual tasks, the need for mastery may take precedence over the need for connectedness, because they require us to focus on facts and information. Establishing mastery is more important in these tasks than expressing connectedness.

In judgmental tasks, the focus is on value-laden social and personal issues. The need for connectedness is then more important than the need for mastery.

Whenever connectedness concerns are activated, it is the norms of "me and mine" in-groups that impact what people think, feel, and do.

But, most of the time, the need for mastery, the need for connectedness, and the need to value "me and mine" are fulfilled simultaneously by conformity to group norms. These functions make conformity to norms central to success in social life.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Mastery and connectedness [see ch09-RA-03.doc]

So what does this mean?

Conforming to group norms (1) satisfies our need for mastery, because people believe that consensus tells something about reality; and (2) gives us feelings of connectedness,

because conforming to group norms results in attaining a positive and valued social identity, and in winning respect from other group members. A group has *informational influence* when people conform because of the need for mastery, and *normative influence* when conforming out of their need for connectedness. The type of task influences which need is more important and which people serve as a **reference group**. The presence of group members, identification, and the frequency and closeness of interaction influence the amount of **conformity** to group norms.

HOW GROUPS FORM NORMS: PROCESSES OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Ask yourself

- What kind of consensus is most common?
- How does consensus happen?
- How does information processing affect the group's position?

What you need to know

GROUP POLARIZATION: GOING TO NORMATIVE EXTREMES *(SP pp. 326–327)*
EXPLAINING POLARIZED NORM FORMATION *(SP pp. 327–332)*
- Superficial processing: Relying on others' positions   - Systematic processing: Attending to both positions and arguments

GROUP POLARIZATION: GOING TO NORMATIVE EXTREMES
(SP pp. 326–332)

You might expect that a middle-of-the-road compromise would be the most likely outcome when people share their views.

It is more common that most groups initially lean in one direction, because groups are often formed because of shared views. In addition, evidence might also lean towards one direction.

Stoner (1961) demonstrated that when people work in groups, decisions are more risky than when people work alone. However this finding had nothing to do with risk, but was the first demonstration of **group polarization**: a group's initial average position becomes more extreme after group interaction.

Group polarization also takes place in the jury room (see SP p. 326).

EXPLAINING POLARIZED NORM FORMATION

(SP pp. 327–332)

Group norms become polarized regardless of whether the information that is discussed is processed superficially or systematically.

Superficial processing: Relying on others' positions

Group polarization occurs when processing information superficially because (1) undecided or dissenting group members adopt the majority consensus; and (2) people want to be the best possible member of the group, and want to represent the group ideal. Social comparison with other group members makes people realize that they are not above average, and people adapt their initial position to a more extreme one.

Systematic processing: Attending to both positions and arguments

When a decision is important, one pays attention to the arguments and positions of other group members. Group polarization occurs in this situation because majority arguments are more numerous, cause more discussion, seem more compelling, and are presented as more compelling.

- *Majority arguments are more numerous:* When members lean towards one direction, more people talk about that specific direction, and about the arguments that should lead to that direction. So initial preferences bias the kind of arguments discussed, making the group's view more extreme. This is termed the *persuasive arguments explanation* of group polarization. Polarization becomes more extreme if evidence is of a high quality and/or novel.

- *Majority arguments cause more discussion:* Arguments that people think others share are discussed more, because people think information they agree on is most relevant to what is discussed.

- *Majority arguments seem more compelling:* Majority arguments are more compelling because people tend to pay particular attention when different people come to the same conclusion (repetition). Information raised by a group member becomes confirmed, so has been socially validated. Unshared information is called into question because it is not verified by others.

- *Majority arguments are presented as more compelling:* Next to seeming more compelling, majority arguments are also presented as more compelling because (1) information that many group members share is more easily raised in discussion; and (2) majority arguments are expressed with confidence and presented effectively, whereas minority views are expressed with hesitation. These minority views may therefore be seen as more uncertain or as lacking commitment from the person expressing the view.

So what does this mean?

When discussing issues, most groups initially lean in one direction and, after group discussion, the group's initial average position becomes more extreme, termed **group polarization**. Group polarization occurs when processing information superficially, because (1) undecided or dissenting group members adopt the majority consensus; and (2) people want to be the best possible member of the group, and want to represent the group ideal. Group polarization occurs when processing systematically because majority arguments are more numerous, get more discussion, seem more compelling, and are presented as more compelling.

UNDERMINING TRUE CONSENSUS

Ask yourself

- When does group consensus lead to invalid and unreliable decisions?
- How can groupthink be avoided?

What you need to know

WHEN CONSENSUS SEEKING GOES AWRY *(SP pp. 332–336)*
- Consensus without consideration: Unthinking reliance on consensus   - Consensus without independence: Contamination   - Consensus without acceptance: Public conformity   - Pluralistic ignorance and health risk behavior
CONSENSUS SEEKING AT ITS WORST: GROUPTHINK *(SP pp. 337–339)*
Remedies for faulty consensus seeking

WHEN CONSENSUS SEEKING GOES AWRY

(SP pp. 332–336)

Group consensus is highly valued because we think we can trust the outcome of multiple individuals coming to the same conclusion. However, we cannot trust a consensus if (1) people adopt a consensus without carefully considering the relevant information themselves; (2) people are contaminated by shared biases; or (3) people publicly conform to norms.

Consensus without consideration: Unthinking reliance on consensus

When different people independently come to the same conclusion, consensus is valid. However, when people do not consider relevant information themselves, consensus is reached without consideration, and does not have much value.

Consensus without independence: Contamination

People are less influenced by views from a group than by views from separate individuals. This is perhaps because of the possibility for group consensus to be contaminated.

In contrast to trusting consensus when reached by *separate* individuals, we expect to agree more with *similar* others. So similarity in terms of features that are relevant for decision-making, but difference in other aspects, is important for trusting a consensus.

People therefore trust in-group members' decisions more than decisions reached by out-group members; in-group members are seen as simultaneously more similar and yet different, while out-group members are viewed as similar to one another.

Consensus without acceptance: Public conformity

People often go along with group norms to get along (see SP p. 335). This destroys the reliability of the consensus.

Disagreeing people feel fear, and anticipate negative reactions.

A single supporter helps us to resist majority pressure.

When publicly conforming to a group's norm that no one privately endorses, *pluralistic ignorance* exists.

Weblink: More information about pluralistic ignorance
www.answers.com/topic/pluralistic-ignorance

Pluralistic ignorance and health risk behavior

Pluralistic ignorance may contribute to social and health-related problems, like drinking, risky sexual behaviors, and illegal drug use. In order to prevent this from happening, people should become aware of what others are really thinking.

CONSENSUS SEEKING AT ITS WORST: GROUPTHINK

(SP pp. 337–339)

When a group becomes more interested in reaching agreement than in how agreement is achieved, ineffective decisions may be made. When this desire or pressure to reach an agreement interferes with effective decision-making, this is termed **groupthink**.

Groupthink situations can start out as ordinary situations, and occur when (1) consensus is achieved without consideration of all available evidence; (2) consensus is contaminated because members' views are not independent; or (3) consensus is achieved by publicly conforming without acceptance. This produces an illusion of unanimity rather than true consensus. Pluralistic ignorance also reigns when thinking everyone else accepts the group decision.

Weblink: Groupthink and the Iraq War

www.nytimes.com/2013/03/18/opinion/krugman-marches-of-folly.html?hp&_r=2&

CASE STUDY: Groupthink [see ch09-CS-05.doc]

Remedies for faulty consensus seeking

Groupthink can be avoided by making sure all available evidence is considered; dissenting information should not be avoided or suppressed. Appointing a devil's advocate can also help.

A second way in which groupthink can be avoided is through group membership being selected for diversity, making sure members' views are independent from each other.

Finally, people should state their private opinion in public votes, tolerance for disagreement should become higher, and the role of powerful and respected members should be minimized.

So what does this mean?

A consensus is invalid if: (1) people adopt a consensus without carefully considering the relevant information themselves; (2) people are contaminated by shared biases; or (3) people publicly conform to norms. When publicly conforming to a group's norm that no one privately endorses, *pluralistic ignorance* exists. **Groupthink** situations, where the desire or pressure to reach an agreement interferes with effective decision-making, occur when (1) consensus is achieved without consideration of all available evidence; (2) consensus is contaminated because members' views are not independent; or (3) consensus is achieved by publicly conforming without acceptance.

MINORITY INFLUENCE: THE VALUE OF DISSENT

Ask yourself

- Can minority influences alter consensus reached in groups?

- When are minority views most influential?

- Do minorities and majorities influence others using the different processes?

What you need to know

SUCCESSFUL MINORITY INFLUENCE *(SP pp. 340–345)*

•   Offering an alternative consensus
     •   Negotiating similarity and difference
     •   Promoting systematic processing
     •   Minority influence in the courtroom

PROCESSES OF MINORITY AND MAJORITY INFLUENCE *(SP pp. 3454–346)*
BEYOND MINORITY INFLUENCE: USING NORMS TO STRENGTHEN CONSENSUS *(SP pp. 346–348)*

SUCCESSFUL MINORITY INFLUENCE

(SP pp. 340–345)

Minority viewpoints can alter a group's consensus when they offer an alternative consensus, remain consistent, have a balance between similarity and difference from the majority, and promote systematic processing.

Offering an alternative consensus

Minority views can exert influence by undermining confidence in the accuracy of the majority consensus, because people expect everyone to agree.

For the minority to be taken seriously: (1) the alternative view must be a consensus, because agreement among minority members signals that their view is viable; and (2)

they must remain loyal to their consensus, because consistency conveys commitment to the viability of an alternative position.

When the minority viewpoint successfully influences the majority, the effect can go beyond the specific issue.

Negotiating similarity and difference

The minority have to find a balance between offering a consensus that clearly differs from the majority viewpoint, while they themselves are not being perceived as different from the majority.

The minority first have to be part of the in-group to establish credibility before dissenting. This can be done by agreeing on important issues.

The minority lose power if minority group members are thought to share a common bias, if the minority viewpoint is contaminated, and if out-group membership is made salient.

The minority have more influence when they are represented by a diverse group of people.

Promoting systematic processing

Minority dissent promotes systematic processing because plausible alternative views create uncertainty and stimulate majority members to seek additional information, process in greater depth, and make more integrative and considered decisions. Research has supported this empirically (see SP pp. 343–345).

Minority views can change majority attitudes in a direct way. However, attitudes concerning indirectly related issues are changed more often than attitudes of the topic under discussion, because: (1) group members may systematically process the information that affects other information, but may resist openly agreeing with the dissenters because of mastery and connectedness functions; and (2) people hearing

dissenting views may think more broadly, consider alternatives, go beyond the given information, and diverge from the topic, thus becoming more creative.

Minority influence in the courtroom

Although jurors in a real trial may act differently and may be more considerate, it appeared from studies using mock juries (see SP p. 345) that when a decision requires to be supported by the majority, minority influence is weakened, and the quality of decisions is reduced in comparison to the situation where a decision requires unanimity.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: Minority influence in the courtroom on film [see ch09-RA-04.doc]

Weblink: Juror in minority feels bad and pays woman's fine
www.heraldtribune.com/article/20071202/NEWS/712020346/-1/newssitemap

PROCESSES OF MINORITY AND MAJORITY INFLUENCE

(SP pp. 345–346)

Majority and minority views influence others by the same processes; both can be accepted privately and generate public conformity, both can satisfy our needs for mastery and connectedness, and both can encourage superficial or systematic processing.

BEYOND MINORITY INFLUENCE: USING NORMS TO STRENGTHEN CONSENSUS

(SP pp. 346–348)

Consensus is more likely to be accurate when group members are more critical and systematic processors as a group than as individuals, when majority and minority viewpoints are carefully considered, when all information is processed systematically, and when norms supporting dissent are adopted.

Weblink: More about minority influence

So what does this mean?

Minority viewpoints can alter a group's consensus when they offer an alternative consensus, remain consistent, have a balance between similarity and difference from the majority, and promote systematic processing. Consensus is more likely to be accurate when group members are more critical and systematic processors as a group than as individuals, when majority and minority viewpoints are carefully considered, when all information is processed systematically, and when norms supporting dissent are adopted.