

Capitolo 9

Case Study 1

Conformity in kids: How early does it begin?

Whether we like to admit it or not, we have all conformed at one time or another, but at what point in our lives does this behavior begin? Haun and Tomasello (2011) [DOI: [10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01666.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01666.x)] set out to answer that very question by examining conformity in preschool children. In their study, 4-year-old children from Germany took part in an experiment that was very similar to the line study by Asch (1956).

Rather than judging the length of lines, in this study the children each had individual booklets showing animals of various sizes. The children's task was to identify which animal was similar in size to one animal on the opposite side of the page. The children took part in groups of four and one of the children (in the minority condition) had a book that differed slightly from the other children. On certain pages, the size of the animal on the opposite side of the page differed from what was shown in the booklets of the other children. The child in the minority condition always answered last.

On the first round of trials, the children sat in their own individual booths and were asked to complete the animal size judgment task silently and on their own. The results of these trials showed that all of the children understood the task and rarely answered incorrectly. During the experimental trials, the children made their judgments out loud and the dependent variable was how often the child in the minority condition conformed to the unanimously different responses of the other children. In a final set of trials, the children again completed this task silently and on their own. The results showed that, similar to the Asch line study, most of the children conformed at least once and on the trials in which there was a mismatch between the pictures, the children conformed about 38% of the time to the responses given by the other children. Finally, when asked to complete the task again by themselves (with books that all matched), children in both the majority and the minority conditions answered correctly.

The results of this study show that conformity, in which the children know the right answer but go along with the “wrong” answers of the larger group, start as early as 4 years of age. In addition, the children are savvy enough to change their responses when they know they will be answering publicly versus when they know they will be answering privately. It appears that conformity is an ever-present part of all of our lives, even as young children.

References

- Asch, S. E. (1956). Studies of independence and conformity: A minority of one against a unanimous majority. *Psychological Monographs*, 70, 1–70.
- Haun, D. B. M., & Tomasello, M. (2011). [DOI: [10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01666.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01666.x)]. Conformity to peer pressure in preschool children. *Child Development*, 82, 1759–1767.

Case Study 2

Your brain on conformity

Do the brains of people who conform more often look different than the brains of those who conform less? In a recent study conducted in England, Campbell-Meiklejohn and colleagues (2012) [DOI: [10.1016/j.cub.2012.01.012](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2012.01.012)] used MRI technology to study people’s brains in potential conformity situations.

In this study, participants were asked to rate their preference for songs that they wanted but did not own and songs they had never heard before. After making their choices, they then learned which songs were preferred by two respected music-experts. After making a series of such ratings, the participants then rated the songs again and the extent to which their ratings changed to match the preferences of the music critics was used as a measure of conformity. While making each of these ratings, the activity in different areas of the participants’ brains was being recorded.

The results showed that individuals who had more grey matter in the lateral orbitofrontal cortex of the brain conformed more often. These results have interesting implications for conformity among those with brain damage. The findings also beg the question of where these brain differences came from. Do people conform more because they have a greater volume of grey matter in this particular area of the brain, or do people who are born with more grey matter in this area of the brain end up conforming more throughout their lives? Only time (and more research) will tell.

Reference

- Campbell-Meiklejohn, D.K., Kanai, R., Bahrami, B., Bach, D.R., Dolan, R.J., Roepstorff, A., & Frith, C.D. (2012). [DOI: [10.1016/j.cub.2012.01.012](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2012.01.012)]. Structure of orbitofrontal cortex predicts social influence. *Current Biology*, 22, R123–R124.

Case Study 3

Conformity and culture

When cultures are more collectivistic, conformity is higher. Identification with the group also influences the amount of conformity; when people identify highly with their group, they show more conformity than low-identifiers. This is even true when the social norm of the group is “not to conform”!

Jetten, Postmes, and McAuliffe (2002) [DOI:10.1002/ejsp.65] conducted three studies on the power of group norms of individualism and collectivism to guide self-definition and group behavior for people with low and high levels of group identification.

In their first study, they showed that North Americans who identify highly with their national identity, which includes their individualistic culture, are more individualistic than North Americans who are low-identifiers. In contrast, they showed that people from a collectivistic culture who identified highly with their group were less individualistic than low-identifiers.

In a second study, they manipulated the group norms of individualism and collectivism, and showed that high-identifiers incorporate the group norms that are salient at that moment more strongly than low-identifiers.

Finally, in their third study, they replicated this, showing that conformity to group norms is stronger when highly identifying with the group. In addition, high-identifiers stereotype themselves more in line with the salient norm than low-identifiers. So even when the group norm is individualism, high-identifiers show more conformity towards the group's norms.

Reference

- Jetten, J., Postmes, T., & McAuliffe, B. J. (2002). [DOI:10.1002/ejsp.65]. "We're all individuals": Group norms of individualism and collectivism, levels of identification, and identity threat. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 32,189–207.

Case Study 4

You are what others eat

As the old saying goes: "You are what you eat," but did you know that you are also influenced by what *others* eat? If you've ever followed the advice of a friend regarding how to eat better, or used the behavior of others as a cue of how much (or how little) to eat at a party, then you too have experienced the power of social norms on food intake. Researchers from the UK conducted a meta-analysis in which they compiled the results from a number of studies on the food norms of others and how those norms influence individual food consumption. Specifically, the authors focused their attention on whether learning information about what others eat can impact our own eating behavior, even when we are alone.

The results of their analyses showed that, when participants learned that other individuals had consumed a lot of a particular food, they too ate more of the food than those in a control group. In contrast, when the norm was reversed and participants learned that others had not eaten much of a particular food, their own food intake decreased as well. Next, as referenced in the text, learning of the food decisions of in-group and out-group members has an impact on our own food choices.

When participants learned that members of a socially undesirable group consumed a lot of junk food, they consumed less junk food themselves. Intriguingly, the results also showed that participants were more influenced by what others actually eat (i.e., descriptive norms) than by what others say they approve of eating (i.e., injunctive norms).

Taken together, this research provides evidence that the information we learn about what others eat teaches us something about what we should be eating ourselves. This information may contribute to healthier eating behaviors, or not, depending on the norm. At an applied level, these results have important implications for public health campaigns. If we are (influenced by) what others eat, then messages that portray valued others engaging in healthy eating will be more influential than messages telling people how they *should* eat.

Reference

- Robinson, E., Thomas, J., Aveyard, P., & Higgs, S. (2014). What everyone else is eating: A systematic review and meta-analysis of the effect of informational eating norms on eating behavior. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 114, 414–429.

Case Study 5

Groupthink

Janis (1982) determined eight symptoms indicative of groupthink:

- Illusion of invulnerability;
- Unquestioned belief in the inherent morality of the group;
- Collective rationalization of group's decisions;
- Shared stereotypes of out-group;
- Self-censorship;
- Illusion of unanimity;
- Direct pressure on dissenters to conform;
- Self-appointed “mindguards” protect the group from negative information.

His seven symptoms of a decision affected by groupthink are:

- Incomplete survey of alternatives;
- Incomplete survey of objectives;
- Failure to examine risks of preferred choice;
- Failure to re-appraise initially rejected alternatives;
- Poor information search;
- Selective bias in processing information at hand;
- Failure to work out contingency plans.

Studies on groupthink fall into two broad research areas; in one area historical cases of poor decision-making are analyzed, whereas in the other area studies of groupthink are conducted in the laboratory.

Historical cases that were analyzed include, for instance, the decision to focus on training instead of on the defense of Pearl Harbor, despite attack warnings; a series of decisions on the escalation of the Vietnam War; the development of the Marshall Plan; the decision to cover up the involvement of the Nixon White House in the burglary of the Democratic Party headquarters in the Watergate building; and NASA's decision to launch the Challenger space shuttle. Analyzing these cases led to more insights into the theory of groupthink. New symptoms are suggested, and other ones are called into question.

Laboratory studies on groupthink tested the links between symptoms and groupthink. Because groupthink represents privately held feelings and thoughts of individual group members, symptoms of groupthink are measured by "simply" asking group members questions.

Comparing case and laboratory analyses is difficult, but according to Esser (1998) [DOI:10.1006/obhd.1998.2758], both areas of research suggest that group cohesiveness is not strongly related to groupthink, while structural and procedural faults are strong predictors.

References

- Esser, J. K. (1998). [DOI:10.1006/obhd.1998.2758]. Alive and well after 25 years: A review of groupthink research. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 73,116–141.
- Janis, I. (1982). *Groupthink*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.