

An Examination of Individual Differences in Conformity

Jingtian Guo

*Santa Margarita Catholic High School
22062 Antonio Parkway, Rancho Santa Margarita, CA 92688
Jingtian.guo@smhsstudents.org*

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Abstract: The current work aimed to examine how individual differences affect rates of conformity and further reflects upon how this may relate to coronavirus safety behaviors today. This is a theoretical paper that covers literature from both meta-analyses and experimental work, reviewing the principles and processes underlying an individual's likelihood to conform under different internal and external factors. Specifically, this work will address individual differences on the basis of age, sex, personality, and culture, and will then integrate how these traits may be at play when conforming (or not) to the COVID-19 safety procedures (i.e. wearing a mask, social distancing, and washing hands). The paper concludes that rates of conformity among individuals tend to decrease with increasing age, females tend to show a higher level of conformity, people with a personality marked by high stability conform more than people with greater plasticity in their personality, and collectivist cultures result in a higher level of conformity than individualist cultures.

1. Introduction

Conformity, a largely unavoidable phenomenon in society, is defined as the act of changing one's behavior to match the response of others [1]. People can conform in many different settings, such as following the norms, changing opinions to match the group, or just to fit in with people around. While there are drawbacks to conforming too often to the group norm, potentially losing one's voice or sense of identity, conforming too little may also have consequences, as this can make it difficult to integrate into a group. While there are times when conforming is appropriate, and others when it is not, differences in rates of conformity seem to arise among many dimensions. This paper will focus on a range of individual differences that relate to whether one conforms or not to a group standard or norm. It is important to examine individual differences because people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors may differ from one another, which can all cause an individual to conform for a variety of reasons.

Research on conformity blossomed after a study by Solomon Asch (1951), in which he showed that participants knowingly gave incorrect answers to questions to match how the rest of the group (7 confederates) responded. This experiment was groundbreaking in highlighting the power of conformity, but Asch also importantly pointed out that these results may be based on individual differences in the likelihood to conform, and thus are not the same across all people [2]. But what are the factors that determine whether one does or does not conform to the group norm? Being that society is made up of a wide range of individuals with numerous different traits, in order to understand when

someone is likely to conform or obey, one cannot ignore key individual differences that lead to this variance. This paper aims to examine these individual differences on the basis of age, sex, personality, and culture, and will then integrate how these traits may be at play when responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. As an organizational framework, this paper focuses on reviewing previous research on various individual differences in conformity to then further explain how social conformity may play a role in understanding behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which I place a special emphasis on scholarly works that connect conformity to behaviors.

2. Age Differences in Conformity

Age differences is one of the main factors that affect the likelihood that an individual will or will not conform. Research has shown that as people age, they tend to be less concerned with what others think of them [3, 4]. Older individuals may often have less interest in new acquaintances and social partners and are less concerned about the opinions of others [5]. That being said, older individuals rely more on their existing knowledge [6], have more stable beliefs [7], and have a greater sense of self-certainty as well [8]. Thus, as research has pointed out, older adults have been shown to conform less than younger adults when faced with conformity pressure [9]. Pasupathi explains that older adults' confidence in their responses is less influenced by conformity pressure than the confidence of young adults. Overall, the literature suggests that young adults on average conform more than older adults. However, it is important to look more closely at the patterns and nuances of conformity. For example, Pasupathi suggests that older adults may indeed conform more when they believe doing so would give them the correct answer or information. Additionally, the likelihood to conform does not seem to follow a steady linear decrease across age as more differences arise when investigating young adults more closely. Although adolescence is a time when peers and peer influence play an important role on behavior decision making, studies show that between ages 14-18, individuals tend to resist peer influence more than ages of 10-14 or 18-30 [10]. People tend to conform less during middle adolescence as a result of forming their sense of autonomy. Overall, differences in conformity can arise depending on the age and target. In general, various studies have shown that the likelihood to conform generally decreases with age, but that this trajectory may be more nuanced.

3. Sex Differences in Conformity

Similar to differences across age, sex has been also shown to produce strong differences in the likelihood for one to conform, since, like age, sex can function as a form of status. Various studies suggest that women conform on average more than men in group pressure settings [11], particularly those influencing agent is around [12]. However, studies show that this effect may be moderated by age, as older female subjects conformed more with surveillance than without, while young female subjects were not affected by surveillance. In fact, among the younger subjects there seemed to be no significant differences on the basis of sex. Thus, sex differences in whether or not one conforms may not occur in general but arise under specific circumstances. Overall, studies show that women tend to be more persuasible than men and that they conform more in group pressure settings [13, 14]. However, the magnitude of this sex effect has been shown to be quite small across these range of studies. Eagly and Carli (1981) pointed out in their meta-analysis that 79% of the studies on sex differences in conformity were authored by males. Relatedly, male researchers were shown to find that women were more conforming, while female researchers found no sex differences. This is a potential confound within work on sex differences in conformity and must be investigated further in order to truly establish these patterns.

4. Personality Differences in Conformity

Individuals often vary in their likelihood to conform based on personality factors as well. Personality has been decomposed in many different ways in order to examine differences in conformity. For example, in one such study personality was examined using higher-order factors of the Big Five personality traits: stability and plasticity [15]. Stability was defined as emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, while plasticity was related to extraversion and openness. By breaking down the Big Five personality traits into these two dimensions, researchers found that a higher sense of stability positively predicted conformity, while higher plasticity negatively predicted conformity. These results were held in both a university and community sample, which suggests that the findings are consistent across various demographics. Individuals high in stability and low in plasticity tend to be stable but also quite rigid, and thus less able to adjust to novelty or change. This strong relation between stability and conformity supports the idea that some degree of conformity may be healthy, allowing for more fluid social integration. On the contrary, conformity can also act as an inhibitor that may contribute to a loss of “uniqueness”. Therefore, personality traits can have an impact on whether or not one is likely to conform or not. However, other studies have illuminated a crucial point—this may depend upon context. A study on conformity indicated the relationship between the need for affinity, or need to be liked, and conformity might not be positive [16]. Normally, people would have the perspective that people with a high need for affinity would be more likely to conform in a group situation in order to be liked. However, studies show that this is not the case in all situations. Those with a high need for affinity are actually less likely to conform when they are in a group of strangers. On the other hand, those with a low need for affinity are more likely to conform if they are in a group of familiar people. Overall, the big five personality traits of extroversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism influence our way of doing things, which includes our likelihood to conform to the group around us. However, not much research has been done on this field for the past 20 years, and there is room for more investigation.

5. Cultural Differences in Conformity

Finally, culture can have a large impact on whether or not one is likely to conform to the group norm, and these differences have been studied along many different dimensions. Culture is defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions that is invented, discovered, or developed by a certain group [17]. One such way to categorize various cultures more broadly is by labeling a culture as individualist or collectivist. An individualist culture is one that promotes individual achievement, while collectivism stresses group membership and the position of the group in society [18]. An individualist culture tends to value affluence, holding leadership roles, and achieving higher education, for example. Collectivist cultures, on the other hand, tend to place value on following norms and fulfilling one’s role [19]. These cultural differences can heavily affect the likelihood to conform in society. In fact, a meta-analysis was conducted on work within the realm of culture and conformity and found that collectivist countries tended to show higher levels of conformity than individualist countries [18]. This could be due to the norm that people in individualist countries tend to focus more on personal goals, while those in collectivist countries often focus on goals shared with others, putting the interest of the community before their own.

This same meta-analysis also analyzed the relationship between culture and conformity in two other ways: first by looking at differences in conformity between countries, and then moving to examine changes in conformity throughout history within the United States. Beginning with the first method, by looking at studies examining differences across countries, research from Dr. John Berry found differences in conformity on the basis of high versus low food-accumulating societies. This research group consistently found that high food-accumulating societies, mostly pastoral or

agricultural societies, need individuals who are conscientious and compliant, as functioning in these types of societies requires a higher level of obedience and responsibility. Low food-accumulating societies, on the other hand, depend on hunting and fishing and thus need people who are individualistic and assertive, since success within this society requires greater self-reliance and independence [20]. As a result, a high food-accumulating society needs strict rules and limits to follow in order to maximize the benefits, and thus relies on conformity to achieve their goals. Overall, cross-cultural differences in conformity may arise when examining a country's economy, as economies based on agricultural practices are likely to promote higher levels of obedience and conformity, compared to economies that rely on hunting and fishing [21, 22].

While much research has studied differences in conformity on the basis of broad categories such as economy, others have looked more specifically at differences between certain cultural groups using Asch's line judgment task, allowing researchers to directly compare different cultural groups using the same paradigm. To name a few, Norwegian students were found to conform more than French students [23]. White women were found to conform more than black women (although there were no differences between black and white men) [24], while other research groups found that black individuals were overall more likely to conform than white [25]. Another study that took place in the US found that Puerto Rican boys conformed more than white [26]. In Britain, Perrin and Spencer [27] found much higher conformity among unemployed West Indians compared with white students. Lastly, there is evidence for greater conformity among Chinese [28, 29] and Brazilian individuals [30, 31] when compared with Americans.

Finally, when examining a range of studies that have looked at differences in conformity across history within the US, one research group conducted three experiments to reflect the fluctuating levels of conformity, tying these changes to the sociopolitical climate at each time point. Researchers found that while conformity seemed to be low in 1974, likely due to the Vietnam era, conformity rose again in 1979, due to the decline in student activism and stronger career orientation of the population. However, in 1988 researchers witnessed a lower level of conformity again, which could potentially be due to the protests at the time [32].

In summary, research has illuminated differences in conformity that may be driven by cross-cultural and historical differences. This has been studied by looking at individualist versus collectivist societies, by comparing economies (e.g., high versus low food-accumulating societies), and even when examining changes in one culture across time. As a result, collectivist countries and high food-accumulating societies tended to show higher levels of conformity.

6. Conformity in the time of COVID-19

As evidenced by this paper so far, it is clear that the likelihood to conform to the larger group can be influenced by many factors – age, personality, culture, sex, etc. These factors can work in combination or independently to predict whether one will conform in various situations or not. In December 2019 in Wuhan, China, the coronavirus pandemic was first detected, and would soon be spread to the rest of the world, introducing a need to conform to guidelines that many countries have never experienced before. By January 2021, more than 101 million cases were confirmed. As the World Health Organization announced, coronavirus mainly spreads through direct contact with respiratory droplets of an infected person. As a result, wearing masks can be most effective in stopping the spread of the virus. In response to this information, many countries mandated mask-wearing as a public safety procedure. For example, in the US it is a requirement to wear a mask in at least 40 states when in public places. This posed a challenge to many—do they comply with the instituted policies? In everyday life, it is common to comply to social norms, and people are typically expected to, as they may suffer considerable social costs for behavioral deviance [21]. After all, human beings, according to Aristotle, are social animals, and are thus heavily affected by the surrounding environment.

Conversely, humans also pay attention to various forms of deviance and are often celebrated for generating novel, counter normative ideas, resisting the directives of authority figures. This perspective helps to explain the reason behind why some people choose to go against the authoritative suggestions while others find it important to abide by the social norm.

For the past several months, The World Health Organization and many important figures in society have been asking people to wear masks, avoid crowds, and maintain social distancing, meaning stay at least 6 feet from other people who are not family members [33]. As a result, many people have moved to adopt this policy and wear masks, likely because they were either told to by authority figures (obedience), may get or transmit the virus if they don't comply, or perhaps to fit in with the group (conformity) and show the group they care about others.

However, others have acted contrary to both authority figures and their communities at large. Many of these individuals have gained followers by speaking up for their rights under the banner of freedom, or stating that the mask is too uncomfortable, amongst other reasons. Refusing to conform in this case can lead to negative consequences for all. As the number of deaths from COVID-19 continues to skyrocket in the United States, an individualist country that places value on individual thoughts and achievements. According to a New York Times database, 25.8 million cases have been confirmed in the US [34].

Culture may play an important role in this. Researchers have posited that cultural differences in conformity may have originally arose due to varying ecological conditions, in which individuals living under a higher prevalence of disease-causing pathogens were more likely to promote greater conformity as a result of a survival need [21]. While this effect did not hold for pathogen prevalence in modern times, it is still notable in attempting to understand how various cultures have reacted to the pandemic today given their history.

Most people today have not been through a global pandemic of this magnitude before and are thus more nervous and fearful than ever. However, fearful behavioral immune system responses can potentially lead to conformity to the majority opinion due to common beliefs throughout history that following social norms can be a protection from diseases [35]. Besides, evidence suggests that many have been instilled with the idea that “breaking social norms can have harmful and unintended consequences,” and this may then be another driver of conformity [36]. Humanity is still learning to deal with this global pandemic, but social norms, sometimes, can be our first line of defense.

7. Conclusion

Examining individual differences in whether or not someone is likely to conform to the group norm is helpful in understanding when, where, and who will conform, particularly as it relates to COVID-19 safety behavior. The literature has indicated that rates of conformity may change on the basis of age, sex, personality, and culture. In general, people tend to be less conforming as they age, while among them, women have been shown to conform more than men under group pressure. On the other hand, people with a personality marked by high stability conform more than people with greater plasticity in their personality. Lastly, collectivist cultures and agriculturally based countries have been shown to conform more than individualist cultures, and countries whose economies center on hunting and fishing. These are important factors to consider regarding whether one is likely to conform to coronavirus safety behaviors, as these various factors may or may not be influential. However, the study of individual differences in conformity is important for informing policy. For example, when the states demand the public to wear masks, according to Damian R. Murray, Russell Trudeau, and Mark Schaller [21], individuals tend to follow the social norms and may suffer considerable social costs for acting differently. As a result, individuals are likely to comply with COVID-19 safety behaviors. Conversely, some individuals also value different forms of deviance. People are often celebrated for having counter normative ideas or for resisting the directives of authority figures, which

might result in acting in contrast with social norms. Reviewing the individual differences as they relate to whether or not one would conform to a group behavior is informative for understanding how to approach COVID-19 safety behaviors, and to ultimately understand how individuals are behaving during this pandemic.

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