

Examining The Psychological Intersections Between Individualistic and Collectivist Cultures, and Social Conformity

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ABSTRACT

This paper will go into depth to uncover the truth behind individualistic and collectivist cultures. There have been different studies regarding the principles of the two cultures comparing ethnicity, gender, and psychological effects on social conformity. In this study, the paper will dive into the social conformity between the two cultures. This research publication will go in depth regarding the different dimensions of collectivist and individualistic cultures – by looking into gender norms and differences, neurological components of the brain’s functionalities and response to varying cultures, prevalence of online conformity in the digital culture, in conjunction with how African-American culture is influenced by the principles of conformity.

Introduction

From cultural roots and differences, there are contrasting views regarding society and community. The individualistic culture will emphasize the importance of independence and personal value, while collective cultures signify the bond and importance of community and relationships within their environment. This however, is not the debate of selfishness vs. selflessness, but the impact it brings to the perception of the individual. This results in social conformity because of the individual differences. Individualistic psychology is an essential perspective because it forms one’s own ideology and cultural set of beliefs rather than allowing society to determine one viewpoint.

Collectivist Cultures: How Are They Defined?

Collective culture influences one’s perception of themselves.¹ Their perspective in serving their community influences the types of characteristics they have as well. However, the relationships in that community are limited. The collective culture is limited to a geographic standpoint, therefore creating some difficulty to meet new people outside of their own culture and mindset. Social conformity, in hindsight, delays the development of the human mind. When humans are prone to a certain way of living, the changes in environmental stimuli can enable humans to acquire different perspectives, beliefs and living habits. Just in the same way social psychologists have uncovered that collectivist cultures (typically evident in Asia and Europe) differ from individualistic cultures (like the US) by having higher rates of conformity in adhering to the values and principles of the group, cultural and geographical location take part in defining the minds of adolescents.

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Principles Behind Social Conformity

Just as conformity stems from our environment and upbringing, it forms from our school environment as well. From authoritative influence and pupil's pressure within the school environment, some students are pressured into acting and behaving in a certain manner that a school environment deems as correct. Individuals tend to follow the majority group, due to fear of isolation and rejection. When people do not align with some beliefs and cultural values brought up by their environment, that collective group rejects and isolates themselves from that person. As seen in many teenagers today, the discontentment to the school culture, leads to hatred and resentment from the individuals within that environment. This hostility can lead to the pressure of conforming to these beliefs and ideology, detaching themselves from their own identity. The individualistic culture promotes the importance of becoming comfortable in our own identity, as well as seeking independence from a contrasting environment. In an educational environment, students must grow into their oneness and separate themselves from an environment that does not align with their own values. Social conformity has become so impactful, that it psychologically affects people even today.

Conformity in Different Environments

Organisms react to different environmental changes. Many cultural traits could be determined in various everyday forms such as farming or fishing. An individual choosing between these variants can be much influenced by social learning. This means that learning is influenced from observing and interacting with other people. Humanity's ideas and acquisition of knowledge can be impacted by individuals such as themselves, simply by observing them in different environments of society. Social human learning is governed by multiple rules (Boyd and Richerson, 1985, Laland, 2004, McElreath et al., 2011), and learning strategies are common in different environments.

Analysis of formal population-genetic and game-theories have explored this by identifying stable strategies that evolve under natural selection. Individual and social learning are favored with natural selection when environment changes in long and short intervals. (e.g. (Aoki et al., 2005; Boyd and Richerson, 1985; Boyd and Richerson, 1988; Feldman et al., 1996; Rogers 1988)). Boyd and Richardson's (Boyd and Richerson, 1985, Boyd and Richerson, 1988) series of mathematical models help to understand conditions of which individual and social learning are adaptive. Individual learning allows one to conform to behavior based on local environments by observing the environment and its cues. Boyd and Richardson concluded that it is more difficult to evolve with social learning, the greater the likelihood of environmental change.

Gender Differences in Conformity

Eagly (2013) suggests that women may conform more to social influence compared to males. Her social theory believes that many of the behavioral differences are noticed between men and women and how they are supposed to act. The rooted cultural stereotypes and social roles taught to young people affect them as they grow older. Eagly adds that men are stereotyped to be agentic and adamant. As a result, males resist outside influences more than women. For instance, Eagly, Wood and Fishbaugh (1981) conducted a social surveillance experiment that surfaces from men's non-conformity with this surveillance. The male's conformity was remarkably lower than the females, and also lower than the female conformity without surveillance.

Women may conform more to social influence because of the collectivist culture they are expected to abide by. There is an expectation of warmth, cooperation, and compliance (Carli, 2001), as well as "the female gender role's emphasis on communal qualities" (Eagly, 2013, p.98). Guadagno and Cialdini (2002, 2007) also

found that women were more persuaded by face-to-face communication, and men more persuasive by computer-mediated communication. This supported the thought that there was a higher communication and cooperation among women, but higher competitiveness for men.

Psychologists' Perspectives Behind the Brain and Conformity

Psychologists and neurosciences today have been examining the neuropsychological mechanisms that contribute and impact social conformity. Research has shown that different parts of the brain associated with different functionalities light up, in response to varying social stimuli. For instance, neuroscientists have reviewed fMRI and MRI results to uncover that tasks related to social information, information integration and task-related activity that heightens cognitive control has led to the amygdala lighting up.² Because of the impact it leaves on the amygdala, which is responsible for storing memory and consolidating long-term memory, psychologists have uncovered that socially-mediated memory distortions that result from social conformity are linked to the high-intensity activity within the amygdala.

Furthermore, new research has shown that neural signals that are activated from exposure to conformity are similar to the signals that light up from the brain due to reinforcement learning. In an experiment conducted by Klucharev et al. (2009), researchers saw from neuroimaging results that when individuals' behaviors and ratings differed from that of the collective group, the rostral cingulate zone – a part of the brain that is located in the medial prefrontal cortex, responsible for processing conflict had been activated.

Conformity in the Context of African-American Culture

The social conformity regarding racist ideologies brought from the U.S. environment is still in effect today towards different cultural groups. For instance, the historical trauma from African Americans has influenced their psyche. The continued psychical and mental trauma during enslavement, Jim Crow laws, the Civil Rights Movement, to the current police brutality supports the continuous oppression of African Americans have had subsequent impact on the community as a whole. This has impacted their mental health, a lower economic status, housing segregation, and mass incarceration. As this happened to a large group of individuals from war, slavery, terrorism, and more, this causes a collective trauma towards the African-American community even as society evolves. As a result, there have been treatments to support individual strengths. The Cultural Formulation Interview(CFI) provides a 16 question introduction to receive cultural information that shows relevance to a mental health assessment. CFI's 12 supplementary modules also portray the significance of cultural competency and emphasizing self-care.

Cyber-Conformity in the Digital Era

As conformity continues to spread its prevalence in small and large groups, how is social conformity behavior impacted in the online space? Based on the normative social conformity paradigm developed by Asch,³ a recent study investigated whether conforming behaviors were different – comparing a version where users saw other

² Chen, X., Liu, J., Luo, YJ. *et al.* Brain Systems Underlying Fundamental Motivations of Human Social Conformity. *Neurosci. Bull.* 39, 328–342 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12264-022-00960-4>

³ Asch, S. E. (1956). Studies of independence and conformity: I. A minority of one against a unanimous majority. *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied*, 70, 9, 1--70.

players represented with a picture, with the other demonstrating a live video stream. Upon comparing social conformity in these two situations, findings revealed that participants in the “live video” group showed more conformity behaviors than the “photo variant” group.⁴ In another study investigating the differences between normative and informational consumer conformity in an online virtual community, it was uncovered that conformity is related to virtual community characteristics⁵– thus, reinforcing the idea that community members have a higher likelihood of feeling pressured to adapt and assimilate into their virtual communities.

How Different Generations of Age have been Impacted by Social Conformity

From studying developmental literature, there lies the suggestion that the pressure of social conformity has climbed to its peak with adolescence, and diminishes as people mature later as adults. There’s the contrast that older adults are less pressured into social conformity than younger kids, because they have better self-control and resistance to their emotions. However, because as people grow older, socioemotional goals become more important (Carstensen, 1995, 2006), and there’s a declining cognitive control within older age (Amer et al., 2016; Braver & Barch, 2002), there is also the debate that older people are more susceptible to social conformity. By conforming to other people’s particular behaviors, this supports their socioemotional goals of having shared experiences.

In order to understand age’s influence and social context with self-control, the initial method is to demonstrate a two-way interaction from age and if other individuals succumbed to their desires, or showed resistance. However, there was no result of whether age truly affected the ability to resist desires due to the pressure of social conformity. Furthermore, after testing the three-way interaction between age, resistance attempts on successful resistance of desires, and social context, it implied that older adults were better at regulating their resisted desires. Between the age and social context, older adults were shown to be less influenced by other people's pressure to socially conform to their desires.

There are multiple factors to why older people may be less influenced from the pressure of social conformity compared to younger individuals. For instance, the developmental literature suggested that other people’s influence wanes significantly around the end of adolescence and into adulthood. The controlled system and affected system are significantly affected by age. The affected system’s reactivity, marked by adolescence, also contributed to the development of the controlled system. In adolescence, the impact of peer pressure is a large impact on the reactivity of the affective system (Chein et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2015). As the two systems mature in adulthood and become more balanced, the influence of peers decreases. This explains the contrast between the influence of social conformity as younger people compared to older individuals.

Although the prevalence and influences of social conformity on varying gender are evidently clear, it is notable also to acknowledge how as part of ethical limitations of this publication as a whole, conformity has been defined as a large sense of a psychological theory without closely separating its influences on women and men. While women may be prompted to conform to due to societal expectations and perceptions towards them to fulfill their gender roles as a mother, sister, or are influenced by beauty or societal standards of how female figures serve in societal day-to-day lives, men may be influenced to conform due to societal expectations for them to adhere to their responsibilities as the provider of their family, working professional, or as a father. Thus, as these research findings of this publication become diversified to look into how conformity serves a role in our society, it is a crucial point to ensure these findings represent these differences amongst women and men.

⁴ <https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/1868914.1868951>

⁵ <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/17505931011070578/full/html>

Conformity in The Context of Professional Settings

In three variables of the opportunity and power structure, including the sex ratio in the common workplace, these factors shape both women and men's behavior in organizations. The difference in how men and women's opportunities for structured positions in areas of work, affects behavior in the workplace. As women are more likely to face discrimination than men, and at the bottom of opportunities and power hierarchies, women may be more concerned with their relationships with other people, creating peer groups for it takes more precedence over parts of work. In a research project on corporations, Homall(1974) surveyed over a hundred employees on their own perspective towards promotion. They found that men tend to be more motivated for promotion compared to women, as the women in Homall's sample were mostly clerks in dead-end jobs. The limited aspirations of women are not shocking, compared to the men in the sample mostly being accountant clerks or in specific positions that gave them the advantage to move up in companies.

With women, because there are lower chances for them to advance in certain organizations, they are more concerned with maintaining interpersonal relationships on the job, motivating increased performance. For some women, these peer relationships were the motivating factor of work. More women(68%) than men(61%) emphasized the importance that coworkers are friendly and helpful to them (Crowley, Levitin, and Quinn, 1973). As men compared to women had more opportunities and advantages of work, this can explain why women behaved differently than men in organizations. As a result, women are perceived to be less serious and motivated in areas of work compared to males. Women not being as initiative and active in the workplace in contrast to men, due to less opportunities presented to them, can create a negative connotation for women in workspaces.

From both a psychological and sociological standpoint, it is essential to establish the necessary frameworks and policies that can help ensure that individuals moving from one job to another can fulfill their professional aspirations by mitigating the negative consequences compliance and conformity can bring to individuals' lives.

Conformity in The Context of Education

As conformity has been explored in the context of professional backgrounds, how is conformity also influenced by the context of educational backgrounds? In a particular study conducted at Surabaya State University, researchers utilized a quantitative research form through a cross-sectional survey. Upon utilizing an instrument that was an empirical adaptation of the Gough's Conformity Scale, results compared a group of students that were at the middle-school level and high-school level – varying in educational levels. Findings exemplified how students are influenced in educational context by their friends and peers when adhering to their academic tasks. As social conformity is rooted in the resistance to engulf their feelings of shame and guilt, findings mirrored how individuals coming from a collectivistic culture (the Indonesian population of youth attending the Javanese school) tend to value harmony, avoid confrontation and promote compliance over individuals coming from an individualistic culture. (Dewi et al., 2019) In the same study, researchers also identified how conformity in an educational context is also influenced by socioeconomic statuses. Results uncovered how conformity tends to be more prevalent in individuals from lower socio-economic status in order to mimic the behavior of individuals from higher socio-economic statuses. Yet, when these individuals from the same population moved to areas to mingle with individuals from lower statuses, conformity was less prevalent in order to ensure these individuals maintained a sense of uniqueness and individuality – their core sense and identity as individuals. (Dewi et al., 2019)

As research findings continue to evolve, it is imperative to keep in mind how students' approach towards academic decisions are influenced by social comparison and principles of conformity — it is significant

to keep in mind how students are able to foster the most academic accomplishments in an environment that supports their individual goals, regardless of the performance of their peers that surround these youth. Thus, what are some critical interventions? Through establishing novel educational frameworks and policies that govern youth's ability to create a sense of purpose and academic fulfillment, conformity as a behavior can be minimized and mitigated by ensuring students have the necessary support, resources, connections to academic resources.

Solutions for Breaking the Cycle of Conformity and Implications

With all of the foundations for conformity established, how could the cycle of conformity be broken, to foster higher self-sufficiency and independence? Conformity has been seen to be prevalent in a smaller group size, when there is presence of an ally, and most notably seen where individuals are struggling to answer a task or question, it could be established that social conformity can be reduced by creating a space where individuals are not in close proximity with one another. By boosting one's self-sufficiency and independence by allowing members to work independently, the rates of high conformity could also be mitigated by encouraging individuals to express their viewpoints before they are pressured by societal standards – either consciously or unconsciously – in aligning their viewpoints with those of others.

Furthermore, it is just as meaningful to foster great leadership skills in building greater decisions by building an inclusive workplace culture. It was established from the CliftonStrengths assessment that teams that were high in performance possessed high leader, intellectual and analytical skills – thus, highlighting and reiterating the need to mitigate leadership, by centralizing upon one's own individual accomplishments, ideas, and novel perspectives.⁶

Conclusion

Social conformity can be determined between succumbing to a different culture and environment. In conclusion, collectivist cultures have been deemed as a selfless way of living, but one's individuality allows them to determine their own perspective and beliefs in a culture. There have been noticeable ways to conform to certain cultures digitally and from societal pressure. By learning how to break the toxic cycle, society is able to embrace their individuality and independence. In essence, as future researchers utilize these research findings, social conformity can be adapted in various disciplines within cognitive, developmental and social psychology in hopes of witnessing how societal standards are influenced by age, gender, and other variable factors like ethnicity.

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⁶ <https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/>

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