Conformity

Sociology

Conformity By definition conformity is a change in behaviour or belief as a result of real or imagined group; it is synonymous to agreement. It is not just acting as other people act, but it is also being affected by how they act. It means that you might even think differently from the way you would, if you were alone. Conformity could be both good and bad, it depends on the situation. If it leads to someone to drive drunk or take part in a racist actions then without any doubt it is definitely negative. However some degree of conformity is necessary for societies to function. For example, when you stop at a red light, you are conforming to the law and to the general agreement that for the good and safety of society, a red light means stop. You stop, even though most of the time there is not a police officer on the scene to enforce the law. Nevertheless, the word “ conformity" may carry a different value in different cultures. North American and European psychologists, reflecting their individualistic cultures, give social influence, like conformity, negative labels rather than positive ones like for cooperative team play and responsiveness. Where on the contrary, other societies put a higher value on fitting in or conforming. There is a Japanese proverb that roughly translates into the saying " The nail that sticks up gets hammered down," meaning that it is better not to stand out in a group but to conform. Military organizations are an example of a group that expects a high level of conformity in the behaviour of their members and punishes those who do not conform. There are two forms of conformity: informational social influence and normative social influences. Informational social influence occurs when one turns to the members of one's group to obtain accurate information. An example of what is when a person goes to a posh restaurant and doesn’t know which knife and fork to use, he starts to look at other people and repeat their actions.

Arthur Jenness in 1932 conducted an experiment, where participants individually estimate the number of beans in a jar, and then do the same as a group. He found that when the task was carried out in a social group, the participants would report estimates of roughly the same value (even though they had previously reported quite different estimates as individuals). The study was successful in showing majority influence, thus proving that individuals' behaviour and beliefs tend to lean toward a group mean. Informational social influence was first documented in Muzafer Sherif's (1936) autokinetic experiment. He was interested in how many people change their opinions to bring them in line with the opinion of a group. Participants were placed in a dark room and asked to stare at a small dot of light 15 feet away. They were then asked to estimate the amount it moved. The trick was there was no movement; it was caused by a visual illusion known as the autokinetic effect. Every person perceived different amounts of movement. Over time, the same estimate was agreed on and others conformed to it. Sherif suggested that this was a simulation for how social norms develop in a society, providing a common frame of reference for people. Normative social influence occurs when one conforms to be liked or accepted by the members of the group. For instance, when someone starts to smoke because others in his peer group smokes, or when a person starts to dress like his friends just so he would fit in or avoid bullying. Solomon E. Asch (1955) was the first psychologist to study this phenomenon in the laboratory. He conducted a modification of Sherif’s study, assuming that when the situation was very clear, conformity would be drastically reduced. He exposed people in a group to a series of lines, and the participants were asked to match one line with a standard line. All participants except one

were secretly told to give the wrong answer in 12 of the 18 trials. The results showed a surprisingly high degree of conformity. 76% of the participants conformed onimpact theory (Latané, 1981), which has three components. The number of people in the group has a surprising effect. As the number increases, each person has less of an impact. A group's strength is how important the group is to you. Groups we value generally have more social influence. Immediacy is how close the group is to you in time and space when the influence is taking place. Psychologists have constructed a mathematical model using these three factors and are able to predict the amount of conformity that occurs with some degree of accuracy (Latane & Bourgeois, 2001). Normative social influence usually results in public compliance, doing or saying something without believing in it. Baron and his colleagues (1996) conducted a second " eyewitness study", this time focusing on normative influence. In this version, the task was made easier. Each participant was given five seconds to look at a slide, instead of just one second. Once again there were both high and low motives to be accurate, but the results were the reverse of the first study. The low motivation group conformed 33% of the time (similar to Asch's findings). The high motivation group conformed less at 16%. These results show that when accuracy is not very important, it is better to get the wrong answer than to risk social disapproval (Baron, Vandello, & Brunsman, 1996).