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Conformity in Our Youth

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Conformity in Our Youth

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ABSTRACT

Current studies show that conformity is a social tool used during development to convince children to accept society's norms and expectations. These social norms are created and maintained through public institutions such as schools and social media platforms which children interact with every day. Through these common experiences, children often adopt social norms and form a group identity to belong in the greater society. As a part of a group, children can often fall victim to peer pressure which can negatively impact their mental health, create risky behaviors, and make it harder to voice opposing opinions. This literature review explores the positive and negative effects of conformity and what society can do to better support children in this modern era. People can assist in creating a supportive environment by providing information on the struggles that children face within institutions which foster conformity.

Conformity in Our Youth

WHAT IS CONFORMITY?

Throughout the early stages of forming their identities children are constantly changing, growing, and learning how to become part of society. Part of that personal growth is understanding the cultural norms, social rules, and how to fit in a group. Kosten, Scheier, and Grenard (2012) and Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) explain that a necessary part of growing up is learning to model one's behaviors after the people around them so that they can create and reflect the socially desirable behaviors, attitudes, and opinions of their society.

ADOPTION OF NORMS

Conformity causes children to change their behaviors to adopt social norms. Children will constantly compare themselves to others as a natural tool to understand right from wrong. Conformity can look significantly different based on the environment the person is in and the cues that are causing them to change their behavior. Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) explained that there are two different types of conformity: informational conformity and normative conformity. Informational conformity occurs when one uses others "to form an accurate interpretation of reality and behave correctly" (Cialdini & Goldstein, page 606, 2004). Normative conformity occurs when one shapes their behaviors or opinions similar to others with "the goal of obtaining social approval from others" (Cialdini & Goldstein, page 606, 2004). Informational and normative conformity can occur in both conscious (strong conformity) or unconscious (naïve conformity) methods as the person alters to their environment (Zhang, Deng, Yu, Zhao, et al., 2016). Conforming to the environment around us is a natural tool that all people use at different stages of development to be successful in their social culture.

SOCIAL IDENTITY

Social identity plays a critical role in deciding how people conform to the individuals around them and the social rules that are presented. One's social identity is challenged daily because it is constantly changing to fit into the social rules and norms that must be followed so that an individual will be accepted. Spears (2021) argued that the impact of conformity on social identity has a significant impact on the way that a person believes, perceives, and associates information. Spears (2021) explained that conformity can have a conscious or unconscious impact on a person's identity. Consciously, people may change aspects of themselves because they notice that they are not following the rules of society (Informational) or the people around them don't approve of their actions (Normative). Unconsciously, people may also be impacted by the environmentally created scenarios that people put themselves in. Asch (1956) further provided evidence of this implicit bias by showing how participants will accept the majority's decision. Asch found that people exposed to majority opinions that contrasted with their own would be more likely to answer incorrectly. At times people would choose to follow the group decision even when they knew this would be answering incorrectly. They also found that the more trials that an individual spent with the confederate group, the more likely they were to lose their independence and side with the group. This is due to a social desirability effect caused by conformity. The person wants to fit in and be liked by those who surround them. To fit in the participant will change their social identity to match the needs of the group around them. There can be significant negative consequences for choosing to conform; however, there are also consequences for choosing to not conform.

DISSENTION FROM THE GROUP

Dissenting from the group can also be extremely difficult for children when they live in an environment that emphasizes following societal rules. Stowell, Oldham, and Bennett (2010) explain that children are often afraid of sharing their opinions due to fears of peer rejection or humiliation. Children who do not conform often open themselves up to peer rejection, harassment, and bullying due to the strong emphasis that society places on following social norms. These non-conformers are treated as outsiders in society and disregarded by their peers. Stowell et al. (2010) estimated that 66% percent of their participants failed to share their opinion in the classroom and most of the opinions shared were reiterations of other peers' answers. By disagreeing with the majority, peers can also be seen as disloyal to the group (Santor, Messervey, & Kusmakar, 2000). When group members feel that someone is being disloyal to the group, it is seen as a lack of respect. A perception of disrespect for the group can lead to those dissenters then being ostracized from the group. A lack of supportive community can be devastating to a child's self-concept and have long term effects throughout childhood and into adulthood (Joshi, Sharma, Kang, & Grewal, 2023). Dissenting from the majority impacts people of all ages but appears especially harmful during childhood when children are very successful at picking up cues from their peers, and when children refrain from dissenting from peers due to the resulting negative consequences.

SENSITIVITY TO CONFORMITY CUES

Research has shown that children are more likely to be sensitive to conformity cues than adults (Minich, Falk, Cooper, Cosme, et al., 2023). Younger people are more sensitive to social cues than adults because they don't have the experience that comes with being an adult. Children are constantly learning from peer-to-peer relationships as it's a crucial part of the learning system. Lalli (2020), explained that during their childhood years, teens are changing their

behaviors to test the rules of the social environment. As children, they learn important cues such as how to wait in line or to keep their hands to themselves. Environments present social rules that people must follow. During childhood periods, teens are more observant, adaptive to social structures, and faster at picking them up. By following social rules, they are conforming to societal norms or expectations which creates positive feedback and can increase sensitivity to social rules.

NEGATIVE & POSITIVE IMPACTS

Conformity is an abstract concept with both positive and negative environmental impacts. As a child, we want to learn how to fit in and be a part of a group (Santor et al., 2000). Santor et al. (2000) and Borgos-Rodriquez, Valentine, and Hammond (2015) both cite evidence showing that pursuing the need to fit in can cause negative side effects such as cyberbullying, risk-taking behaviors, and substance use. These negative behaviors can be seen commonly in current times due to the prevalence of stereotypes, unrealistic expectations, and the need to fit into a social group whether it be virtual or in-person. Behaviors, like the ones previously mentioned, can have adverse effects on the growth of both the person engaging in the behavior as well as the people around them. Adverse effects can result in low self-esteem, mental illness, a lack of friendships, and numerous negative coping mechanisms.

Conformity can also have positive impacts on a child. Lalli (2020) reveals several positive reasons as to why children conform as well. Conformity encourages the use of social rules that need to be followed and executed to be a part of the group. Children are constantly following social rules in their everyday lives. It can be as simple as the path in which they walk up and down the stairs, how they stand in an elevator, or how they sit facing towards the teacher as he or she lectures. The behaviors are unconscious and normative examples of conformity

within one's society. Social rules hold everyone to the same standards and allow for people to know the expectations when interacting in their environment. Without social rules or structures, society would be dysfunctional and struggle to run successfully. Thus, conformity is both a positive and negative piece of society that influences its members.

SCHOOL CONFORMITY & SOCIETAL RULES/ NORMS

One of the largest institutions that fosters conformity is the education system. Saldana (2013) provides insight into school institutions, as it has a role in creating the future generation of adults who will set societal rules and norms that govern the members of its society. Schools are charged with educating people on societal norms and are influential in the way that children perceive the world. From a very young age children are taught how to conform in society. The education system creates social rules that students must follow such as not talking when an adult is speaking. Educators set expectations and peers unconsciously assist in holding fellow students accountable for following social rules (Lalli, 2020). Lalli explains that social rules could be used as directly applicable skills to the outside world. Everyone in society needs to understand the culturally acceptable ways in which to interact within a cafeteria/restaurant or even in large and small social settings. Schools, in this example, build the foundation which provide students the environmental contexts to the outside world.

SCHOOL: PEER INFLUENCE

Peer influence in the school system has a massive impact on the way that students identify, treat others, and learn academically. Joshi et al. (2013) explained that the role of peer pressure in a school environment is incredibly important as students create their identity. Students will identify themselves as part of a group and that identity is a critical piece of who

they are. Groups can create pressure amongst their student peers to engage in behaviors that are both positive and negative (Chen & Deng, 2022). In a classroom, members of a group will conform to the consensus or the most outspoken person because they want to feel accepted. Sowden, Koletsi, Lymberopoulos, Militaru, et al. (2018) supported this by sharing that students who were asked to publicly share an answer would be more likely to conform. However, when given the opportunity to give an answer privately that student would answer differently from the group. Another great example of peer influence is the way that students dress based on what their classmates wear. Students will often compare their style with others and try to match what other peers are wearing. When students don't conform, they are often bullied and ostracized from the group. Schools create an atmosphere where the most important thing is to fit in and be accepted by your peers (Saldana, 2013). In a lot of ways, it's a popularity contest for children, where the person who can conform the most will be the most successful and well liked. Children listen to their peers and watch to see what others are doing to understand how they should be acting.

SCHOOL: GENDER CONFORMITY

One of the biggest social differences in school conformity is caused by gender differences among children. Hilliard and Liben (2010) shared that children are very attuned to their gender stereotypic norms. Children know at a young age what is normal or irregular about behaviors that belong to them through social roles. They create social in-groups and out groups, which helps them set up gender categorization. It's important to recognize and acknowledge social categorization as it's significantly harder to break long-standing traditional roles when a large number of people still conform to social rules associated with gender. Furthermore, it can be difficult to deviate from social roles due to the way that majority groups may ostracize individuals for breaking social norms. Riggs, Kinard, and Long (2023) shared that students were

more likely to rate peers more positively when they were perceived as conforming to gender roles than when they were not perceived as conforming to gender roles. The preference for gender conforming peers can help us understand that children are constantly comparing themselves to one another and stereotypic norms. Especially since, becoming part of a peer group is one of the largest goals in children (Santor et al., 2000). This fact further explains why people are more likely to conform than break social rules.

Gender conformity may be due, in part, to thinking pathways that develop at different times in males and females. Male brains maintain use of bottom-up thinking (a more reactionary form of thinking) longer than females, whereas female brains use top-down thinking (a more conscious and critical form of thinking) earlier than males. Hanimoğlu (2018) shared that the type of risky behavior shown is usually environmentally specific to the cultural norms. It is important to understand that the environment a child experiences as they develop will impact and shape their social norms. This evidence contributes to the narrative describing why school conformity has a gender component as cultural, social, and cognitive processes differences all consciously and unconsciously influence people.

Within the school community there is also gender specific differences between boys and girls. Heydar, Van Hek, and Van Houtte (2020) explained that males were 14 times more likely to get involved in school misconduct than their female classmates. This tendency for school misconduct increased as male students increased in age. Stowell et al. (2010) also found that girls were more likely to conform to a group when answering questions than boys. Female students were described as timid and had a larger fear of dissent from peer social values than male students. Traditional gender roles impact how female and male students socially identify because they create divisions that emphasize the categorization of people in society. Gender roles

can lead to scenarios where girls are less likely than boys to answer questions or speak in a group. This internalized stereotype plays a role in many environments including the education system.

SCHOOL: RISK FACTORS

In the school system there are several risk factors caused by conformity that need to be understood, addressed, and acknowledged. Heydar et al. (2020) explained that men have a higher risk of experiencing the negative effects of conformity such as low academic performance, use of alcohol or drugs, and misconduct. The generalization of risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol use to a wide audience in the school system can increase the chances that children will become involved in negative activities and be less successful in their school career. Saldana (2013) further supported this notion by explaining that male minority group members are at even higher risk of conforming to risky behaviors compared to people from a majority identifying identity. Uchida, Michael, and Mori (2020) explained that children who were of low academic standing had the highest risk factor of conforming to their peers. Students struggling academically were more likely to engage in risk taking behaviors compared to their peers. People who conform are continuously enforcing the stereotypes that society enforces, creating a cyclical effect. Over time, individuals may begin to believe the negative identity that society labels them with and could internalize that information.

SOCIAL MEDIA & SOCIAL MEDIA: PEER SOCIALIZATION

Another environment conformity plays a critical role in, is the way that children think and behave on social media. Social media as a concept is relatively new and has had an incredible impact on how children perceive the world. It inspires connection and creates division based on the social rules that are created on the platform. Andrews, Foulkes, and Blakemore

(2020) shared that there is a heavy influence of peer socialization that takes place on social platforms. Children want to feel accepted and part of the group so they will model their behavior off the people that they look up to on these platforms. This can have detrimental impacts on the way that children will act on these platforms.

SOCIAL MEDIA: CYBERBULLYING

One of the ways that social media has impacted children online is through its alternative route in which bullying can occur. Borgos-Rodriguez et al. (2015) express that even though people understand that bullying is a huge problem on social media platforms, some continue to perpetuate the existence of cyberbullying. Borgos-Rodrigues et al. (2015) also acknowledged that the problem could be with the social media platform itself. Anyone can sign up for an account and there is very little protection for children since they can lie about their age to join online websites. This poses a significant issue with safety as children can be the targets of cyberbullying, or they may engage in it themselves. Chan, Cheung, Benbasat, Xiao, et al. (2023) described the three types of people that may be involved in the situation: the perpetrators, victims, and bystanders who all interact on social media platform. All these people play a role in perpetuating the negative cycle of abuse that people are subjected to online. A major orchestrator of cyberbullying is the anonymity that is enjoyed by the perpetrators (Chan et al. (2023). Keipia and Oksanenb (2013) explained that these perpetrators are then supported by people who join in on the cyberbullying and by the bystanders who do nothing. Psychological research suggests that this may be due to the effect of anonymity produced by the environment of social media platforms.

SOCIAL MEDIA: THE DANGERS OF ANONYMITY ONLINE

Anonymity occurs when individuals experience a sense of being nameless or unidentifiable. Anonymity can occur when individuals are alone or when they are part of a group. Feeling anonymous allows people to act in ways that they normally would never consider. Keipia and Oksanenb (2013) offered an explanation as to why this occurs. On online platforms, social media consistently fails to regulate anonymity or cyberbullying. Nitschinsk, Tobin, Varley, and Vanman (2023) explained that people who create toxic or negative behaviors online use anonymity as a shield against retribution from the people they target. These individuals can fulfill their need to act while feeling comfortable knowing that they won't suffer the consequences of their actions. These aggressors do not want to be exposed for who they are and use the online platforms to ensure that they cannot be held accountable for their malevolent behaviors. People want to feel validated as a part of a group, which is why if they see a group of people attacking someone online, they might join in. Conformity is allowed because of the way that people can be anonymous during the act. The people engaging in this destructive behavior understand that, as a part of a group, they can feel validated and accepted for their choices. Nitschinsk et al. (2023) further explained that people will be anonymous to achieve gratification. This need for gratification can subconsciously push people into situations that cause more anonymity. Andrews et al. (2020) supports this claim and describes that children look to their peers consistently to conform to behaviors that they are seeing online. Children will be more likely to cyberbully if their friends are engaged in these types of behaviors because online there is a feeling of safety caused by anonymity. Most of the time no one regulates these types of behaviors online, and there can be devastating consequences due to the destructive power of social media.

SOCIAL MEDIA: SELF-ESTEEM ONLINE/ SOCIAL SUPPORT

Keipia and Oksanenb (2013) highlight the dangers of social media platforms as they discuss the impact of self-esteem through online validation. Individuals at a young age care a significant amount about their social identity with their peers. The desire to be perceived as socially desirable can have negative impacts on self-esteem if one is evaluating their worth on the reactions from people online. Andrews et al. (2020) explains that social media platforms have a greater risk of increasing peer influence between children due to the way that information travels fast and is far-reaching. This fast-acting nature of social media may be a problem due to the amount of information that children are forced to evaluate on a continuous basis making it harder to understand and find how they fit in. Children are constantly told multiple times a day by social media that they need to change to fit an image set by people on their screens. Jain and Meyers (2022) shared that marketing teams use this knowledge to their advantage to advertise what they want young people to buy. The problem with this is that young people are doing everything they can to conform to online social norms. Unfortunately, there is very little moderation regarding what gets pushed on the social media platforms. Social media is used as a platform to inform people of a host of information, some of which includes unrealistic expectations that children are unprepared to evaluate.

When children begin to conform to unrealistic expectations, they often choose to reach out to others online to get support in creating a social support system because of the anonymous nature of online platforms. Leung (2011) expressed that children without social support will often substitute face-to-face interaction for online support systems. Online platforms allow people a certain level of anonymity, which can be comforting for people who struggle with social interactions. This experience can be damaging though due to the low level of support that these children will receive online. It also is alarming that children with a lack of support are being

supported by often anonymous figures who often do things online that they normally wouldn't do in person (Borgos-Rodriguez et al., 2015). Unsupported children are putting themselves at the risk of being bullied or having sensitive information that they shared being leaked.

Online platforms make it so easy to communicate with anyone, but the risks associated with that are extremely high because you cannot trust everyone on the internet. Social media has a huge impact on how children act, believe, treat others, and their self-perception. It is important to understand the social rules that are being created on these social platforms because those are norms that are being taught to children and are the ones that they are conforming to daily.

SO, WHAT CAN WE DO?: EDUCATING THEM

Conformity has a huge influence on our world, but there are things that can be done to limit the negative impact of conformity. One of the best ways of deterring the negative effects of conformity is by educating children. Children cannot recognize their biases without understanding what their biases are and how they impact their lives daily. Joshi et al. (2023) provided evidence of the effectiveness of educating people through their work with undergraduate students. When society educates children, they give them the tools to be self-aware of their own life where they are conforming to behaviors that are negative (Chen & Deng, 2022). College students created coping skills and responded positively to peer pressure in ways that meet their needs. Not only were they able to recognize these conforming scenarios but there was also evidence to suggest a decrease in peer pressure. Children need to be educated in a similar way to ensure that they can create coping mechanisms to respond to unhealthy peer pressure situations. Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) also shared that people in general want to believe the majority. If these children are educated about the dangers of believing in these negative social perceptions, it may make them more skeptical of the majority's opinion. This

information maximizes the chances of the child thinking before engaging in risky behaviors or blindly following the majority expectations. Children need to be supported and paid attention to as the people in their lives will impact the person they become. If society wants to limit the negative impacts of conformity, it needs to ensure that children get the support that they need and create a foundation in which they can be educated to understand (Hanimoğlu, 2018). That means that people like teachers, parents, and mentors need to look at their roles differently to understand how they can best the support the children in their lives.

SO, WHAT CAN WE DO?: CHANGING ROLE MODEL MENTALITY

Educators, parents, mentors, and community members are in a strong position to impact change within the community to reduce the negative behaviors created by conformity. Lalli (2020) explained that authority figures can set the expectations for the students in the classroom and outside in other areas such as the lunchroom. Social norms are set, followed, and enforced by role models. It stands to reason that people in positions of authority over children can influence the way that students perceive themselves and create a positive environment in which they can develop. These individuals are role models and children look up to them. Instead of only interacting with children when they have done something wrong, role models need to begin a dialogue early. If the goal is to prevent children from engaging in risky behaviors, then children need to be paid attention to and have open communication with a trusted adult (Hanimoğlu, 2018). These open dialogues must acknowledge misperceptions that children deal with daily from unrealistic expectations of how they should look to drug use and peer pressure. By opening the door to open and honest conversations, children are learning that it is okay to reach out for support with the knowledge that they are not alone (Cruz, Torre, Castaños, & Tus, 2022). When

people work with children, it is important that they proactively empower them with the tools to deal with conformity instead of reactively responding to their negative behaviors.

SO WHAT CAN WE DO?: OTHER INTERVENTIONS

One of the best ways to intervene with negative conformity effects in schools is to create a comprehensive plan to support the needs of students based on a survey (Cruz et al., 2022). The creation of this type of plan would allow students to feel a supportive structure that would assist them in receiving resources for ongoing issues such as mental health. It also allows children to feel heard and gives them the opportunity to share what needs are not being met for them. Having this type of plan would also help provide proactive strategies like in school information sessions for various topics to support students struggling with conformity. It may also be helpful to regulate the material that is being shown to children.

Another way of limiting the spread of these negative impacts on children is through the regulation of dangerous content that people can see online. Regulations can take place online requiring that social platforms monitor instances of violence, cyberbullying, and ensure the wellbeing of its users (Babvey, Capela, Cappa, Lipizzi, et al., 2021). This tactic can help prevent children from being exposed to dangerous and harmful material. Currently there is very little to protect children from these harmful messages on social media platforms because the laws are significantly flawed with loopholes. Children can sign up for platforms by lying about their age and no one monitors this issue. Chan et al. (2023) describes how individuals and groups on the internet can be repeatedly attacked with few repercussions for bullies or others committing heinous acts such as releasing false information or fake news which can be extremely harmful to a child's identity. Social media platforms should intervene and address the issue before others

join in due to conformity or the effects of anonymity. Children need support on these societal platforms, and these companies can do better to protect them from unnecessary harm.

In sum, conformity is a part of a child's everyday life, and they interact with it consciously and unconsciously. Without conformity, our society could not function. It is important for a child to recognize the environmental pressures in their own life. By understanding these factors, a child will be better set up for social environments such as schools and social media platforms where conformity pressures are maintained by society. In the future, there should be more research done to recognize the best environments to educate children on the harmful impacts of conformity. Another research area that has become an area of interest is how COVID-19 impacted children during the pandemic years and now in post-pandemic life. There needs to be more research in this area to understand how being stuck at home as a child would impact a child's socialization at school and online. In the vast amounts of research on childhood conformity, this literature review only addresses some of the largest social environments and impacts that children face today, but there is still a significant amount that needs to be explored on this topic.

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