The Social Impact of Conformity

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What is Conformity?

According to Chartrand & Bargh (1999), conformity takes place when people adjust their behaviour or thinking to coincide with a ‘group standard.’ Specifically, conformity manifests itself as a direct result of an individual’s willingness to accept others’ opinions about reality.

The degree to which people conform in any given situation is dependent upon a number of common factors. These usually relate to the extent to which:

1. someone is made to feel incompetent or insecure in a given social setting (eg fear of peer pressure can facilitate this).
2. a social group is unanimous about a specific ‘idea’ or ‘worldview’ (eg religious doctrine/values).
3. a particular social group is perceived to possess high social status and/or charismatic power (eg celebrity fashion trends/lifestyles etc).
4. an individual has no prior commitment/stance on particular social perspectives (eg societal attitudes regarding immigration/refugees).
5. the mainstream/dominant group closely observes the behaviour of newcomers to the group (adolescent peer groups do this all the time).
6. one’s culture strongly encourages respect for a social standard (eg religious values).

Reasons for Conformity

People conform in a social context for a number of reasons.

The most significant reason why people conform is a direct result of what is known as **Normative Social Influence**. This type of influence results as a consequence of an individual’s innate desire to gain approval and/or avoid rejection by the majority. More often that not, people have a tendency to respect or adopt ‘normative behaviour’ because if they don’t, there may be significant social costs incurred by those individuals if certain mainstream attitudes or values are not embraced.

Another reason for conformity is **Informative Social Influence**. Mainstream society usually seeks to enculturate its membership at the micro, meso and macro levels to value particular norms, values and mores. As such, mainstream society provides what it collectively considers to be ‘valuable’ information to the majority of the populous via socializing institutions such as schools, media and government departments. Despite this, there will always be some people will never adopt the information provided eg; some individuals, for various reasons, choose not to have their children vaccinated against various childhood diseases thereby reducing the ‘herd immunity’ levels in our society.

**Mindless conformity** is another reason for the adoption of mainstream values, attitudes and perceptions. There will always be some individuals in society who will automatically adopt the behavioural cues of others in the community without ever thinking too deeply about why they do so. Rightly or wrongly, contemporary adolescents are often accused of behaving in such a manner when they engage with social media, hairstyles and fashion etc.

Further Research:

http://www2.psych.ubc.ca/~schaller/Psyc591Readings/CialdiniGoldstein2004.pdf
**Conformity - Online Activities**

Watch the following TEDtalks and/or Youtube clips on conformity.

1. *Conformity – Dead Poets Society Movie* (youtube)  
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnAyr0kWRGE
   Watch the clip and answer the following questions:
   
   a) How is ‘conformity’ explained in this clip?  
   b) What is the essential message about ‘conformity’ that emerges from this clip movie?

2. *‘Looks aren’t everything. Believe me, I’m a model Cameron Russell’* (Ted talk)  
   https://www.ted.com/talks/cameron_russell_looks_aren_t_everything_believe_me_i_m_a_model?language=en
   Watch the clip and answer the following questions
   
   a) Why is image such a powerful force for conformity?  
   b) What does Cameron mean by suggesting that she “won a genetic lottery”? In terms of conformity, why is this problematic for women in our society?  
   c) Outline the stereotypical images of beauty to which many young women conform.

3. *‘Asch’s Conformity Experiment’* (youtube)  
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NyDDyT1DhA
   Watch the clip and answer the following questions:
   
   a) Explain the premise of this classic experiment into conformity.  
   b) What does this experiment tell us about the psychology of conformity? Is this a good thing? Why?