

You Are a Conformist (That Is, You Are Human)

Recognize that conformity is inevitable and avoid its pitfalls.

Posted Dec 05, 2010

By Noam Shpancer Ph.D.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/insight-therapy/201012/you-are-conformist-is-you-are-human>

The philosopher Hannah Arendt famously argued that the atrocities of the Holocaust were not caused by psychopaths but by ordinary people placed under extraordinary pressure to conform. Since then we have learned that the pressure need not be extraordinary at all. In fact, it may not be experienced as pressure, but as relief. Human beings are herd animals. We survive only in highly coordinated groups. Individually, we are designed to pick up social cues, coordinate and align our behavior with those around us. Recent research has shown that social disapproval provokes the brain's danger circuits. Conformity soothes.

In my class I sometimes do the following demonstration: I ask two student volunteers to step outside. I tell the remaining students in the class that their task is to avoid all contact and interaction with the volunteers. I promise them points on the next test if they succeed. I then instruct the two waiting outside that their task is to do all they can to engage the class members in any sort of interaction. I then usher them back inside. After they spend several painful minutes failing to elicit any response from their peers, I declare the demonstration over. I ask the two volunteers how they felt. Terrible, they say. Embarrassed, rejected. Then I ask the remaining students to guess the demonstration's purpose. They usually guess it was designed to show the difficulties of being an outsider, a social reject. But the point is actually the opposite: to show how easy and automatic it is to conform.

(VOCAB) Define Conformity:

(CONNECT) How is conformity a relief? Give examples from your life.

(QUESTION) What makes conformity or rebellion “worth it” to you?
Others?

(ANALYZE) After having been the “victim” in this scenario, how might these individuals act toward someone who is being bullied or left out?
Why?

"None of you refused to follow my instructions," I say.

"You just spent 10 minutes treating two innocent fellow students miserably and none of you stood up and said: 'Shove your quiz points. I'm not going to treat my peers badly for no reason.'"

We are often not even aware when we are conforming. It is our home base, our default mode.

To keep ourselves in the warm confines of conformity, we rely on two independent yet related types of social cues. First, we look to others for information about what's going on (informational cues). Second, we look for others to see what to do about it (normative cues).

We start to seek out these cues early. As the notion of self crystallizes in the second year of life, the child begins the effort to align the self socially. An infant who falls down looks up to the parents to gauge whether to cry. If mom reacts in fear, tears will follow.

If the mother laughs and reassures--no tears. This early attentiveness to informational cues is called 'social referencing.' Shortly after, the child also begins to align their behavior with those of the group by conforming to expectations to share, wait, or not hit (picking up on normative cues).

(CONNECT) What would it have taken for you to refuse to participate in this activity as one of the students refusing to engage?

(VOCAB) Define "norm" or "normative"

(CONNECT) Describe a social situation when you have been unsure how to act, and who you looked to for information about what to do.