An Outline And Evaluation Of Conformity

Since human beings are naturally social and learn through observation besides the instinct mechanism, major aspects of human psychology and behavior are shaped by social influence. For example, language, gender roles, dressing mode, and taboos are formed based on an individual's cultural exposure. As a result, people develop attitudes, behaviors, and values that are consistent with their culture. Social institutions like family, religious organizations, schools, communities, and peers reinforce behaviors and attitudes. Therefore, social influence is the change of behavior caused by another person. Conformity is one area of social influence, and it has been widely studied to understand how and why people conform. The subject has been explained through various social perspectives that are supported by both classical and current research. This paper aims to discuss the theories of conformity and evaluate research into the subject.

Before delving into the theoretical approaches of conformity, it is important to understand the meaning and types of conformity. McLeod, S. (2016) defines conformity as “a type of social influence involving a change in belief or behavior to fit in with a group.' The change is in response to real or imagined group pressure. Pavitt, C. & Curtis, E. emphasize that an individual conforms if he/she complies accepts an action that is socially acceptable or favored by the majority (1994, 211). People conform to fulfill the desire to fit in (normative conformity) or because of the urge to be correct (informational conformity). There are three types of conformity, namely compliance, internalization, and identification. Compliance is when an individual follows other people’s expectations or desires to achieve a favorable reaction (be rewarded or avoid punishment). Therefore, when a person conforms, he/she does not necessarily agree with the idea. Internalization is a genuine acceptance of social norms. An individual accepts a course of an action or an idea because it is intrinsically rewarding and is consistent with his/her beliefs (McLeod, S. 2016). Identification is when an individual accepts social influence to establish or maintain a self-defining relationship with the influencer(s). People tend to follow the desires of the parties they regard highly and wish to please.

Numerous theoretical perspectives of conformity exist, but the social comparison and the cognitive dissonance approaches are the widely accepted approaches. The social comparison theory was inspired by the unanimous scholarly agreement that people conform to fulfill the psychological need of self-evaluation. Festinger, a major contributor to the social comparison perspective, contended that people conform for the sake of correctness (Pavitt, C. & Curtis, E. 1994, 217). People often evaluate their beliefs against the norms or standards to judge themselves. In the pursuit of self-evaluation, people find other people, normally not too divergent from them, to serve as standards against which they can judge themselves. When people are not satisfied with their self-evaluation, they are highly inclined to change the particular belief, value, of behavior. The Cognitive Dissonance Theory was based on the premise that people are not always influenced by the desire of correctness but also by a need to be consistent. Festinger argued that the social comparison approach is ambiguous because the connection between a person’s desire to evaluate him/herself and the tendency to change is unclear (Pavitt, C. & Curtis, E. 1994, 220). He argues that a person may be satisfied with the positive or negative evaluation thus maintain the status quo. Cognitive dissonance can be expressed in conflicting beliefs. For instance, a person may state, “I like parents” and also, “I

disagree with my parents." A person may like his/her parents, but that does not guarantee that he/she will conform to their desires. A person may reject his/her parents' social influence to be consistent.

Various classical experiments were performed to explain the concept of conformity. In 1935, Sherif conducted an experiment to demonstrate that people tend to conform to group norms when they are in an ambiguous or unclear situation (McLeod, S. 2016). The Autokinetic Effect experiment involved projecting a small spot of light on a screen in a dark room and asked the participants to tell how far the spot moved although it did not. When reporting individually, participants gave varying answers: between 20cm to 80cm (McLeod, S. 2016). Sherif then put together two people with similar estimates and one with a significantly different estimate. When asked again to tell how far the light moved, the people with greatly varying estimates in the groups changed their answers to match the other members' estimates. Sherif concluded that uncertainty causes people to conform to group norms. Another classic experiment of conformity was performed by Asch who asked participants to compare the length of a single vertical line to the other three lines with varying lengths. In the first and second trials, all participants unanimously agreed on one line whose length matched to subject line. However, Asch manipulated the experiment and made the control group agree on the wrong line. This change influenced participants who felt the need to be correct by conforming to the opinion of the majority. 75% of the participants bowed to the social pressure to conform and gave the wrong answer (McLeod, S. 1994). From the findings, Asch concluded that people conform when the size of the majority increases when the stimuli become more ambiguous.

Conformity has also been demonstrated in current studies. Mallison, D. & Hatemi, P., conducted a study to investigate the effects of information and social conformity on opinion change, with a special focus on political opinions (2018). Some observational and experimental research has shown the relationship between social influence and political behavior. Findings suggest that people tend to consult the highly informed individuals in their social settings to make various political decisions like voting (Mallison, D. & Hatemi, P. 2018). Therefore, the highly knowledgeable parties in social networks play the role of influencing others on the appropriate engagement in politics. Building on this knowledge, Mallison, D. & Hatemi, P. placed participants from the Pennsylvania State University in a deliberative environment to explicate the effects of compliance and private acceptance on opinion change (2018). Using a control group, a political topic relevant to the local community was raised, and the participants were subjected to unified opposition to their expressed political views. Participants' opinions were recorded privately before the group discussion, during the discussion, and after the discussion. The researchers found out that 62% of the participants changed their opinions during the discussion or after. The findings are consistent with Asch and Sherif's experiments that showed that people are more likely to conform when in ambiguous situations.

Stallen, M. & Sanfey, A. reviewed studies that took a more complex approach on conformity by examining the brain mechanisms of individuals during conformity. One study asked participants to rate female faces, exposed them to other group judgments on the same faces, and then later asked them to give their rating for the second time. The findings revealed that the ratings shifted in the direction of group ratings (Stallen, M. & Sanfey, A. 2018). Neuroimaging results revealed that when individuals saw the varying ratings from the group, activity in the rostral cingulated zone, which is responsible for the processing of conflict, increased. On the other hand, the brain area associated with reward expectation, the nucleus accumbens, decreased. These findings show that even though the participants changed their ratings, they did not accept the influence,

thus, compliance. Another study looking into the aspect compliance demonstrated how behavioral change could be predicted using neuroimaging. One research revealed that the magnitude of the discrepancy signal in response to a conflict between a group's judgment and an individual's predicted subsequent conformity (Stallen, M. & Sanfey, A. 2018). Structural and functional differences in the orbitofrontal cortex also were also shown to predict an individual's likelihood to conform to the group.

In another study, Beran, T. conducted a series of researches at the University of Calgary to investigate the concept of conformity in the medical field (2015, 3). The first study featured third-year medical students who were learning to perform a knee arthrocentesis procedure in a manipulated environment. The participants watched a video about how to conduct the procedure and were required to repeat it practically. However, the knee simulators they were given had holes in the wrong place, not as they appeared in the video demo. Even though the students seemed not sure, they all ended up inserting the needles in the misleading holes (Beran, T. 2015, 7). The study revealed how people, although unsure, conform when under pressure. The second study examined conformity among medical and nursing students. The two groups were paired and asked to read vital signs including systolic and diastolic blood pressure and radial pulse from a patient simulator. Medical students, who are on a higher hierarchy level than nurses, were the control group. The control group read the vital signs first then nurses followed. The findings showed that 80% of nurses repeated what the medical students had reported (Beran, T. 2015, 16). Nurses, due to desire to be correct and pressure from the medical students who are higher in the hierarchy, conformed by repeating the wrong answers. These studies are consistent with the Social Comparison Theory that illustrates that people change behaviors or beliefs after evaluating them against other individuals or group.

The studies discussed above are in line with the two theories of conformity. The Social Comparison Theory emphasizes that people accept social influence due to the need to be correct. The classical experiments showed how the participants changed their answers after being subjected to the majority who gave the wrong answer. The current studies also indicated how the participants were influenced by others to change their answers to give similar answers because they felt the majority is always right. One study also demonstrated the Cognitive Dissonance Theory was also illustrated in the study that subjected participants to opposed political views. 38% of the participants maintained their initial view, revealing that they were motivated by the need to be consisted. These studies reveal the significance of social influence in people's lives and the patterns of behavior formation.

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