

ANALYSIS OF GROUP CONFORMISM IN SMALL SOCIAL GROUPS

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Abstract: The article examines the features of manifestation of group conformity in student groups of higher education institutions. A theoretical overview of the key concepts of «conformity», «group norm», «student group» and the analysis of factors contributing to conformist behavior is carried out. The empirical part investigates levels and forms of conformity among students from two groups of different specializations. It was found that a higher level of conformity manifests in groups with low cohesion; significant predictors are fear of social rejection and low self-esteem. Recommendations are presented for lecturers and group tutors to reduce negative manifestations of conformity and to develop critical thinking. The article is relevant for educators and psychologists.

Key words: group conformity, student group, group norm, self-esteem, social pressure.

Introduction. The phenomenon of group conformity has attracted the attention of psychologists since the classical experiments of Solomon Asch and subsequent research. Conformity is defined as a change in individuals' behavior or beliefs under the influence of a group in order to comply with its norms. In student groups, where interpersonal and group interactions are formed, this phenomenon can have a significant impact on academic activity, participation in group work, and personal development. The relevance of the study is determined by the fact that in modern higher education institutions, student groups perform not only educational, but also socio-psychological functions; therefore, conformity may both facilitate adaptation and lead to negative consequences (reduced initiative, passivity, groupthink). Despite the considerable amount of research on conformity, there remain gaps in the study of its manifestations specifically in the student environment: there is little data on the relationship between the level of conformity and group characteristics (cohesion, status, field of study) and personal characteristics (self-esteem, fear of rejection).

The aim of the article is to identify the specific features of the manifestation of group conformity in student groups and to determine the main factors contributing to its occurrence. To achieve this aim, the following objectives were set:

1. To provide a theoretical overview of the concepts of “group conformity” “group norm” and “student collective”.
2. To analyze the results of an empirical study of the level of conformity among students from different groups.
3. To identify relationships between the level of conformity, group characteristics and personal variables (self-esteem, fear of social rejection).
4. To develop practical recommendations for teachers and tutors working with student groups.

Theoretical Review. In contemporary social psychology, conformity is viewed as one of the key forms of social influence that determines the extent to which an individual's behavior, attitudes, and opinions correspond to group norms [1]. The term “conformity” was first introduced into psychological scientific discourse in the works of M. Sherif and S. Asch, whose classical experiments demonstrated that group pressure can significantly affect individual perception and evaluation of a situation. Traditionally, psychology distinguishes two main types of conformity. Internal conformity is associated with an actual change in a person's own views and attitudes under the influence of the

group, often accompanied by processes of self-censorship. External conformity, by contrast, is expressed in outward agreement with the opinion of the majority while maintaining one's personal position; it represents a strategy of avoiding open disagreement with the community and manifests primarily at the behavioral level without affecting deeper personal convictions [4, 8]. Alongside this, other classifications of conforming behavior are also found in the scientific literature. For example, H. Kelman distinguished three qualitatively different levels of conformity: compliance, identification, and internalization [5]. Compliance reflects external agreement with the source of influence and persists only as long as this source is present, while the individual's own opinion remains unchanged.

Identification may manifest in two forms — classical and reciprocal-role identification. In the first case, a person seeks to imitate the agent of influence, feeling sympathy and a desire to adopt their qualities; in the second, mutual expectations regarding certain behavior motivate participants in interaction to conform to social roles. In identification, the adopted attitudes are generally not integrated into the individual system of values. Internalization represents the deepest level of acceptance of social influence, at which acquired opinions and norms become part of the individual's internal value-meaning structure, ensuring the relative independence of behavior from external circumstances.

The modern researcher Guangdong Song also proposes distinguishing between rational and irrational conformity. The rational form is based on conscious reasoning and includes such manifestations as compliance, agreement, and obedience. Irrational conformity, by contrast, manifests as spontaneous, intuitive "herd" behavior that arises under the influence of emotional and instinctive processes as a result of observing the actions or reactions of other people [6].

From K. Lewin's perspective, group pressure functions as a key factor in maintaining the group's internal equilibrium and serves as a mechanism of socialization of the individual. In subsequent studies, Festinger, Deutsch and Gerard identified two main types of conformity: normative conformity, which results from the desire to be accepted by the group and avoid its disapproval, and informational conformity, which emerges under conditions of uncertainty when an individual accepts the opinion of the majority as more accurate and competent [3].

A. I. Dontsov and G. M. Andreeva interpret conformity not only as submission to group opinion, but also as a psychological mechanism of personal adaptation within the social environment. The researchers note that manifestations of conforming behavior are associated with such personal characteristics as level of self-esteem, self-confidence, need for approval, as well as with the nature of intragroup relations [1, 2].

Group conformity in the student environment is of particular interest, since it is during this developmental period that social identity, value systems, and professional self-awareness are actively formed. The student group functions as an important social microsystem in which behavioral norms, communication models, and mechanisms of group pressure are shaped.

According to some studies, student conformity may act as both an adaptive and a maladaptive factor. On the one hand, a moderate level of conformity contributes to successful integration into the collective, promotes cooperation and cohesion; on the other hand, excessive submission to group norms leads to suppression of individuality, critical thinking, and creative activity [7].

Personality characteristics play an important role in regulating conforming behavior. High self-esteem and pronounced internal locus of control correlate with lower susceptibility to conformity, whereas anxiety, dependence on social approval, and fear of rejection intensify conforming reactions. Moreover, manifestations of group conformity vary depending on the level of group cohesion, the formal and informal status of participants, the nature of interpersonal relations, and the psychological climate of the collective. In student communities characterized by trust, mutual assistance, and openness, conformity manifests as voluntary coordination of positions. Conversely, in authoritarian or competitive environments, forced conformity is more common, driven by external pressure and fear of social isolation.

Thus, the phenomenon of group conformity in student groups should be viewed as a multilevel socio-psychological construct that includes cognitive, emotional, and motivational components. Its study has both theoretical and practical significance, as it makes it possible to develop effective strategies for fostering independence of thinking, critical perception, and social responsibility among students.

Methods. The study was conducted among students of Fergana State University and Fergana State Technical University, divided into two groups according to their field of study: pedagogical (60 participants) and technical (60 participants). The following instruments were used: a group cohesion scale, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, a social rejection fear scale, and a method for assessing susceptibility to conformity. Statistical data processing included correlation analysis and multiple regression using the SPSS software package.

Results. The conducted empirical analysis made it possible to identify significant differences and relationships between students' personal characteristics and their level of susceptibility to conforming behavior. As shown in results, the overall mean level of conformity in the sample was $M = 32.5$ ($SD = 8.1$) out of a maximum possible score of 50, which indicates a moderate tendency toward group adjustment. When comparing the two groups, it was found that students of the pedagogical university demonstrate a higher level of conformity ($M = 34.8$; $SD = 8.4$) than students of technical programs ($M = 30.2$; $SD = 7.5$; $p < .05$). This can be explained by the specifics of professional socialization: humanities-oriented programs imply closer interpersonal interaction, emotional involvement, and dependence on group norms, whereas technical majors are more focused on individual cognitive tasks and independent decision-making.

The results of the correlational analysis revealed statistically significant relationships between the variables under study. Conformity was negatively correlated with group cohesion ($r = -0.45$; $p < .01$). This indicates that in more cohesive groups, the influence of majority pressure decreases due to trust, open communication, and mutual support. Conversely, a positive correlation was found between fear of social rejection and the level of conformity ($r = 0.52$; $p < .01$), which confirms the hypothesis that fear of being rejected increases the tendency to follow group expectations. In addition, conformity was negatively associated with self-esteem ($r = -0.41$; $p < .01$), suggesting that individuals with lower levels of self-acceptance and confidence are more likely to succumb to external pressure and seek to avoid social isolation.

The results of the regression analysis confirmed that the leading predictors of students' conforming behavior are:

- ✓ fear of social rejection ($\beta = 0.38$; $p < .001$);
- ✓ low self-esteem ($\beta = -0.29$; $p < .01$);
- ✓ group cohesion acts as a restraining factor ($\beta = -0.24$; $p < .05$).

The obtained model is statistically significant ($F(3, 116) = 12.87$; $p < .001$), with a coefficient of determination $R^2 = 0.32$. This means that 32% of the variability in conforming behavior is explained by these predictors. Thus, it can be concluded that socio-psychological factors such as fear of rejection and self-esteem exert a stronger influence on conformity than structural characteristics of the group. This finding is consistent with the conclusions of foreign and Russian researchers (Asch, 1956; Festinger, 1957; Andreeva, 2005), according to which the main mechanism of conforming behavior is the internal striving to maintain a positive social identity and avoid negative evaluations from significant others.

A high level of conformity among students with a pronounced fear of social isolation can be considered an adaptive survival strategy within the academic community, aimed at maintaining emotional security and a sense of belonging to the group. At the same time, excessive dependence on group opinion may hinder the development of autonomy, critical thinking, and academic initiative.

Students with high self-esteem tend to show greater independence of judgment and readiness to defend their own opinions, which is reflected in a nonconforming style of behavior associated with confidence

in their personal and intellectual competence. Therefore, the obtained data allow us to assert that personal characteristics (self-esteem, anxiety, social confidence) are key factors in determining students' conforming behavior, whereas group dynamics only modify the manifestation of these personal tendencies.

Conclusion. Students' conforming behavior represents a complex socio-psychological phenomenon mediated by both individual-personal and group characteristics. It performs an adaptive function, ensuring integration into the academic environment; however, when excessively expressed, it may reduce independence and critical thinking.

The empirical results of the study confirmed statistically significant differences between students of humanities-oriented and technical fields of training. Students of pedagogical specialties demonstrate a higher level of conformity, which is determined by the specifics of professional socialization and the predominance of interpersonal forms of interaction.

Personal determinants of conforming behavior are manifested in negative correlations with self-esteem and positive correlations with fear of social rejection. This indicates that low self-esteem and a pronounced need for acceptance by others increase susceptibility to external group pressure.

Group cohesion performs an ambivalent function: on the one hand, it reduces the influence of conformity due to mutual support and trust; on the other hand, it may strengthen the pressure of group norms when members are highly dependent on collective opinion.

The constructed regression model showed that fear of social rejection and low self-esteem are the most significant predictors of the level of conforming behavior. Together, these variables explain 32% of the variability in conformity, confirming their key role in shaping students' behavioral strategies.

Student conformity should be viewed not only as a manifestation of social dependence but also as a mechanism of psychological adaptation that helps maintain a positive emotional background in group interaction and reduce the risk of isolation in the educational environment.

Based on the results of the study, the following practical recommendations were developed:

1. University psychologists are advised to include training programs aimed at building self-confidence, developing self-presentation skills, and promoting constructive defense of one's own opinions.
2. Academic tutors may use the results of the study to diagnose interpersonal relations and prevent the formation of excessively dependent or submissive behavior patterns.
3. Teachers should apply interactive forms of learning (discussions, project work, debates) that promote the development of critical thinking and reduce group pressure.
4. Psychological support for first-year students should pay particular attention to reducing fear of social rejection and fostering a positive group climate, since this period carries an increased risk of conforming behavior.
5. For future psycho-pedagogical research, a promising direction is the further study of the relationship between conformity, academic motivation, and professional identity, as well as the influence of cultural factors on the manifestations of conforming behavior.

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