

Psychology

1 Work with a partner. Compare and contrast the photos. What are they illustrating?

2 In the text you are going to read about *conformity*. What do you understand by this term? Quickly read the text to check your answer.

Conformity

Conformity can be defined as a social influence, where individuals change their attitude, behaviour and/or beliefs in order to fit with the norms of a particular group in society. Norms are the unspoken rules that are shared by a group of individuals and govern how they interact with others. Conformity can occur at many different levels, from society in general to small groups. Although conformity is usually associated with group interactions, it can occur whilst alone. Examples of this include following social norms regarding hygiene and eating.

So why do people conform? One of the main reasons is the desire to fit in and make friends. If we don't fit in, we risk becoming a social outcast. Psychologists label this **normative conformity**. Another reason is when a person lacks knowledge of a particular situation and seeks guidance from the group, eventually changing their behaviour to align with the group's norms. This is known as **informational conformity**. However, conformity has a wider social function – it enables societies to operate successfully and smoothly by minimising undesirable behaviours. It is therefore crucial for children to learn conformity, in order to be able to interact successfully in society in adulthood.

In general, psychologists distinguish between three main types of conformity. **Compliance** is where an individual feels they ought to change their behaviour, despite not necessarily agreeing with the group, in



order to gain approval from (or avoid punishment by) the group. **Internalisation** is where a person changes their behaviour to fit in with the group, but does so because they agree with the behaviour (see informational conformity above). Finally, **identification** occurs when an individual must conform in order to maintain a positive relationship with another person or group. This often happens in jobs where individuals have to adopt a particular social role, for example nurses. As with compliance, the individual may still retain a different private opinion.

Extensive research has been done by psychologists into the topic of conformity. One of the earliest experiments was conducted by Jenness (1932) in his famous bean jar study. In it, he filled a glass jar with beans. Participants were invited individually to guess the number of beans in the jar. They were then put together in a group and asked to provide a group estimate. Participants were then asked to guess the number individually again and allowed to change the guess they had originally made. He found that almost all revised their number to bring it more in line with the group estimate.

A final point should be made about **non conformity**, where an individual makes an attempt to remain independent of the group. Psychologists have found that non conformity is more prevalent in countries such as the UK and the US, where the individual is considered more important than the group. In these countries, people tend to be more self-sufficient; not only do they feel that they don't have to conform, they make an active choice to be independent.



3 Read the text again. Match the section headings below to the correct paragraph (1–5).

- Research
 What is conformity?
 Non conformity
 Main types of conformity
 Reasons for conforming

4 Are the sentences True (T), False (F) or is the information Not Mentioned (NM) in the text? Correct the false sentences.

- 1 Conformity only happens in the presence of other people. **T / F / NM**

- 2 Conformity is important for society to run successfully. **T / F / NM**

- 3 Most children learn to conform at a young age. **T / F / NM**

- 4 When people conform, their personal opinion always changes. **T / F / NM**

- 5 Certain jobs require people to conform. **T / F / NM**

- 6 In Jenness' experiment, almost all the participants showed conformity. **T / F / NM**

- 7 Non conformity is only found in countries such as the UK and the US. **T / F / NM**

5 Work with a partner and discuss the questions.

- 1 Think of different ways in which you conform to a particular group or groups and describe them to your partner. Can you think of a personal situation where you have shown compliance, i.e. where you have changed your behaviour to fit with a group, without necessarily agreeing with the group?
- 2 How important is conformity in your culture? Do people tend to want to conform, or is non conformity valued by some people?

?? DID YOU KNOW?

Although we are often told that conformity is always a good thing, we shouldn't disregard the importance of non conformity. For example, it is thought that the first settlers in the United States were non conformists – people who did not fit into various social groups within their own native societies. The fact that they were non conformists allowed them to travel and discover new places.

PROJECT

- 1 Work in groups. Research another famous experiment into conformity. Choose one of the following experiments:

Sherif (1935) Autokinetic effect experiment
 Asch (1951) Line judgement experiment
 Asch (1962) Face the rear experiment

- 2 Find out about the experiment and make notes under the following headings:
 - what the experiment aimed to find
 - what it involved (i.e. the procedure)
 - who the participants were
 - what the results were
 - what conclusions were made
- 3 In your group, prepare a presentation for another group who chose a different experiment.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

align [v]: to organise activities or systems so they match or fit well together

crucial [adj]: extremely important because it has a major effect on the result of something

govern [v]: to control the way that things happen
hygiene [n]: the practice of keeping yourself and things around you, clean

norm [n]: accepted standards of behaviour within a society

outcast [n]: someone who is not accepted as a member of society or a particular group

prevalent [adj]: very common in a particular place or among a particular group

retain [v]: to keep someone or something