

Study finds conformity does not equal cooperation

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If you follow the pack are you more likely to co-operate with others in it? Not necessarily according to research into social behaviour by academics at the University of East Anglia.

The study, published in the August issue of the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*, shows that people who do not conform are most likely to work together for the greater good, while conforming to [social norms](#) can actually make people less likely to co-operate – a finding which surprised the researchers and could have implications in the workplace for team design and operations management.

Psychologist Dr Piers Fleming and economist Prof Daniel Zizzo, of the Centre for Behavioural and Experimental Social Science at UEA, conducted an experiment in which they first measured participants' conformity levels and then let them play a game where they could choose whether to contribute financially to the public good. The twist was that although co-operation was mutually beneficial, being unco-operative could produce greater personal gains because of other people's generosity.

Participants' conformity was measured by how much they wished to conform to social expectations and be seen in a positive light, known as 'social desirability'. They completed a standardised measure and were also asked about their attitude towards paying tax. People who score highly on social desirability are more likely to conform, for example by paying tax, and agree with others. The researchers expected that they

would be more likely to co-operate as well.

For the game, pairs of participants matched for conformity had to decide how much to contribute to a fund for the public good, a similar idea to paying taxes – individuals pay in and everyone benefits, for example from security and public order, education and healthcare. In the first part of the experiment highly conforming people stated they would be more likely to pay tax, but during the game when asked to share money for mutual benefit the same people were less likely to share.

The researchers also wanted to know if encouragement to co-operate would increase donations, so half of the pairs of participants were praised for greater investment. The only group to share more money, and therefore earn more money, were the low conformity group who received this approval feedback.

"Contrary to our predictions, conformity does not equal co-operation," said Dr Fleming. "Social desirability has an impact on behaviour in that it doesn't actually lead to people co-operating more.

"Here we've got a measure of people's co-operation, which could apply to any situation where you've two or more people who are trying to co-operate in an activity. For example in a work setting, if you are part of a team working on a project you expect everyone to put the same effort in to the task. The expectation is that people who are high in social desirability will conform to the effort other people are putting into the task, but actually the conforming people may be less helpful because they take their cue from the less helpful members of the team. They are conforming to the person who is not necessarily working that hard."

"If someone is less conformist they may take a lead and put in more effort, so then others may be prepared to put in more effort themselves, and the individuals and the team benefit. Conformity can be a good thing

or a bad thing, depending on what you are conforming to."

Prof Zizzo added: "In this study, although [people](#) who are highly conformist might state they are more likely to pay tax, conformity may, in fact, have made them unlikely to pay more than their partner paid previously. By contrast, the less conforming individuals were willing to ignore their partner's investment and to invest more when they were encouraged by the approval score. This led to greater investment for both and to a virtuous circle of mutual benefit."

More information: *Personality and Individual Differences*, volume 51, issue 3, p258-262, August 2011.

Provided by University of East Anglia

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