

Conformity is not a universal indicator of intelligence in children, study says

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Because innovation is part of the American culture, adults in the United States may be less likely to associate children's conformity with intelligence than adults from other populations, according to research from developmental psychologists at The University of Texas at Austin.

U.S. children are often encouraged to engage in non-conformist and creative behavior. But researchers say this stands in contrast to populations in which child socialization is based on fostering collective and cooperative values that emphasize [social conformity](#).

In a study appearing in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, UT Austin researchers examined how adults view children's behavioral conformity as an indication of their [intelligence](#) and good behavior, comparing the U.S. and Vanuatu, a Melanesian archipelago in the South Pacific.

"Cross-cultural comparisons provide critical insight into variation in reasoning about intelligence. Examining variation in adults' beliefs about children's intelligence provides insight into the kinds of behavior adults value and encourage children to engage in," said Cristine Legare, an associate professor of psychology at UT Austin.

The study combined methodologies from [experimental psychology](#) and comparative anthropology to examine the kinds of behaviors adults associated with intelligence in each population. Rather than describing what makes a child intelligent, participants watched videos of an adult

demonstrating a task, followed by two videos: one of a child imitating the actions exactly as they had been demonstrated; and another of a child deviating from the modeled task. Participants then indicated which child was smartest and which child was most well-behaved.

Ni-Vanuatu adults were more likely to identify the high-conforming child as both smart and well-behaved, particularly when the child was from the same population as them; whereas U.S. adults were less likely to endorse the high-conforming child as intelligent.

"Conformity is interpreted in different ways in each population—adults from Vanuatu interpret conformity as evidence of children's competency and adults from the U.S. interpret non-conformity as evidence of children's creativity," Legare said.

Additionally, the researchers examined potential differences in adults' judgments across socioeconomic status groups within the U.S. to determine the extent to which education level influenced U.S. adult's judgments of children's conformity. Results indicated that adults with no college experience were more likely to endorse the high-conforming child on both measures than adults with higher levels of education, but still less likely than Ni-Vanuatu adults to select the high-conforming child as intelligent.

"Children's learning environments can differ significantly between high and low socioeconomic families, including parents' beliefs about how children should behave and the extent to which children should be self-directed and independent," said Jennifer Clegg, the study's lead author and UT Austin psychology alumna who is now a post-doctoral researcher at Boston University. "Examining variation in [adults'](#) beliefs about children's intelligence provides insight into the kinds of behavior children are encouraged to engage in diverse populations with distinct childrearing goals and values."

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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