



Popularity, likeability, and peer conformity: Four field experiments



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A B S T R A C T

Adolescents tend to alter their attitudes and behaviors to match those of others; a peer influence process named peer conformity. This study investigated to what extent peer conformity depended on the status (popularity and likeability) of the influencer and the influencee. The study consisted of two phases. In Phase 1, 810 12- to 15-year-old adolescents participated in an experiment to measure peer conformity to one of four hypothetical peer groups designed to vary in levels of popularity and likeability. In Phase 2, a subsample of 269 12- to 13-year-old adolescents participated in three additional experiments in which peer conformity to actual classmates was measured. Results showed that participants were more likely to conform to high status peers than to low status peers, that influencer's level of popularity was stronger associated with peer conformity than their likeability, and that influencee's status (either popularity or likeability) played a lesser role in these effects than initially expected. Further, peer status as a mechanism of peer influence did not operate in the same way for boys and girls. Conclusions from the experiments regarding the degree and direction of peer conformity were discussed.

1. Introduction

Adolescents shape each other's attitudes and behaviors through peer influence processes (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Prinstein & Dodge, 2008; Sandstrom, 2011). One powerful mechanism through which peer influence works is *conformity*. Conformity means changing one's attitude or behavior to match that of others because of social pressure (either explicit or implicit; Cialdini, 2009; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

Often what motivates conformity is the urge to obtain social approval from or affiliation with others (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). One way to do so is to conform to the majority attitude or behavior in the group, or to conform to specific others whose approval is sought. A classic example of such *normative influence* is Asch's (1956) study in which participants tended to conform to the obvious false judgements of the other group members (who were all confederates) in judging which lines matched in length. Another motive to conform is known as *informational influence* (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004) which involves people's desire to be right, and to behave and respond correctly. Under circumstances in which people are confused about the correct response, they tend to seek out (social) cues for how to respond. If there is a certain degree of consensus in group members' responses or if specific others are perceived to be more competent or knowledgeable in the task at hand, more social conformity will occur. One characteristic that is

likely to grant normative or information influence to a person is one's status in the group.

Previous research has shown that adolescents are often more swayed by peers who are high in status than by peers who are low in status (e.g., Cohen & Prinstein, 2006; Harvey & Rutherford, 1960; Juvonen & Ho, 2008; Sandstrom, 2011; Sandstrom & Romano, 2007). In other words, high status adolescents wield more social influence and power (social dominance) than low status peers do, perhaps because high status adolescents are those whose social approval is sought or who are perceived to be more competent or knowledgeable. For example, Cohen and Prinstein (2006) found that adolescent boys conformed to the apparent deviant and antisocial attitudes and behaviors of high status peers. In contrast, if participants were led to believe that the same deviant and antisocial attitudes and behaviors were endorsed by low status peers, they did not conform but instead adopted attitudes with an opposite valence. Juvonen and Ho (2008) reported similar results. Middle school students who considered aggressive behavior to be associated with high status displayed increased antisocial behavior in follow-up periods. Thus, high status appears to be a powerful mechanism of peer influence among adolescents.

Why do high status peers elicit conformity? There are several ways in which doing so may yield intra- and interpersonal benefits. First, conforming to someone who is high in status is often regarded as an

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effective way to gain approval and elevate one's own status (Adler & Adler, 1998; Dijkstra et al., 2010; Eder, 1985). Second, conforming to high status peers may allow adolescents to affiliate more closely with them, thereby decreasing their chances of exclusion from the peer group (Dijkstra et al., 2010). Third, conforming to high status peers may enhance self-esteem and allow adolescents to maintain a positive sense of belonging (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

Given all the ways in which conforming to high status peers may accrue social benefits, it may emerge as a particularly adaptive and appealing strategy for lower status peers who wish to enhance their social standing. In fact, several studies have provided empirical support for the notion that lower status peers are especially vulnerable to the influence of their higher status counterparts. For instance, converging research has demonstrated that adolescents who are rejected by their peers are more susceptible to peer influence than accepted adolescents (Dishion, Piehler, & Myers, 2008; Dishion & Tipsord, 2011; Snyder et al., 2010). Harvey and Rutherford (1960) showed that children who rated themselves as low in popularity were significantly more likely to conform to the influence of a high status peer. Prinstein, Boergers, and Spirito (2001) found that adolescents were more susceptible to peer influence when they reported to feel unaccepted by their peers. Further, Lakin, Chartrand, and Arkin (2008) showed that participants who were in the exclusion condition in a Cyberball experiment were more likely to conform to other participants who were in the inclusion condition than to other excluded participants. Other research has shown that among adolescents who affiliate with deviant peers, those who view themselves as low in social acceptance are significantly more likely to engage in deviant behavior themselves (Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991). To summarize, evidence suggests that peer rejection (e.g., low acceptance or feelings of social dissatisfaction) predicts adolescents' conformity to the (deviant) behaviors of important peers.

1.1. Two types of status

In the adolescent peer group, two types of status are generally distinguished, *popularity* and *likeability* (e.g., Lease, Musgrove, & Axelrod, 2002; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998; Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2006). Likeability reflects acceptance and preference; popularity reflects visibility and power. Despite some conceptual similarities, these two forms of high status reflect distinct constructs with unique behavioral correlates (Asher & McDonald, 2009; Mayeux, Houser, & Dyches, 2011; Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2006).

With respect to peer influence, the direction and degree of peer conformity may be affected by the *type* of status wielded by both the source (influencer) and the target (influencee) in a given interaction (Hartup, 2005). Sandstrom (2011) suggested that popularity may have a stronger association with peer influence than likeability. This is supported by research showing that popularity is strongly associated with indices of social influence such as dominance, network centrality, and prestige (e.g., LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002; Lease, Musgrove, et al., 2002; Lease, Kennedy, & Axelrod, 2002; Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998). Moreover, associations of likeability with other indices of social influence, such as admiration, leadership, and social control, typical become weaker when the effect of popularity is statistically controlled. Further, previous research has shown that many of the behaviors relevant for peer influence (e.g., aggressive and health-risk behaviors) are strongly associated with popularity and less with likeability among peers (e.g., Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Mayeux, Sandstrom, & Cillessen, 2008).

1.2. Status of the influencer

In spite of the evidence that popularity and likeability are related differently with peer influence, few studies have examined the interplay of influencer popularity and likeability on peer influence (e.g., Lansu,

Cillessen, & Karremans, 2015; Sandstrom & Romano, 2007). Furthermore, there is also some evidence to suggest that it is not popularity per se that yields the most social influence. For example, Sandstrom and Romano (2007) found that adolescents conformed more to a popular peer only if the scenario involved a public decision and if the popular peer was also well-liked. Lansu et al. (2015) even found a negative association between conformity and popularity; late adolescent girls conformed less to a popular peer than to an average status peer in an imitation task in the lab, which may be due to girls' feelings of resentment towards popular peers (Eder, 1985). In this task, participants were asked to estimate the number of dots on a computer screen while primed by an unfamiliar peer's estimate who was either popular or average. Thus, it is not always only the influencer's popularity that solicits conformity among adolescents. These studies suggest a more complex picture of the effects of influencer status.

1.3. Status of the influencee

In addition to the status of the influencer (i.e., whether this person is popular or likeable), conformity may also be affected by the popularity or likeability of the influencee (Hartup, 2005). If conforming to higher status peers is a way to elevate one's own status, a low status person is likely to conform more strongly than a high status person. Compared to popular or well-liked participants, low popular or disliked participants may be more susceptible to the influence of popular or well-liked peers. Although on the influencer side, there is evidence to suggest that popularity may wield stronger influence than likeability, on the influencee side susceptibility to peer influence may be invariant to type of status; either low in popularity or low in likeability may raise one's susceptibility to peer influence. This is supported by empirical research showing that at the lower end on the status continuum, no distinction is made between adolescents low in popularity and those low in likeability (van den Berg, Burk, & Cillessen, 2015).

Research on how the status of the influencee affects peer influence processes is scarce, however. Although there are studies to suggest this pattern of results (e.g., Dishion et al., 2008; Dishion & Tipsord, 2011; Snyder et al., 2010), this does not mean that high status participants are unaffected by the influence of their peers. Popular or well-liked adolescents may also be susceptible to the influence of other high status peers in order to maintain their status (Haynie, 2001; Sandstrom, 2011). However, given that these adolescents are already high in status which is likely to grant them certain privileges (e.g., power, social control, ability to set the norm), not conforming is likely to come at a lower cost for them than for lower status individuals.

1.4. Gender

There are notable gender differences in peer relationships and peer interactions (see Rose & Rudolph, 2006; Rose & Smith, 2009). Therefore, the effects of status on conformity also may differ by gender. However, we could argue in both directions in terms of who is likely to show the strongest conformity effects, girls or boys. On the one hand, girls are more focused on positive interactions and connection-oriented goals and more concerned about social approval, abandonment, and peer evaluation than boys. This might suggest stronger effects of influencer and influencee popularity for girls than for boys. On the other hand, boys are more focused on status, dominance, and agentic goals than girls, and girls often resent other popular girls (Eder, 1985). These phenomena might imply that the effects of influencer and influencee popularity are stronger for boys than for girls.

The empirical evidence on gender differences in peer conformity is limited. Only a few studies directly have examined gender differences in peer conformity. These studies typically evidenced stronger conformity effects for boys with regard to antisocial behaviors (Iwamoto & Smiler, 2013; Santor, Messervey, & Kusumaker, 2000) and no significant gender differences with regard to neutral or prosocial

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