Reports

At the first sign of trouble or through thick and thin? When nonconformity is and is not disengagement from a group

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ABSTRACT

The current research tests the prediction that nonconformity can reflect engagement with rather than disengagement from social groups. We present two studies that contained indices of both nonconformity and disengagement to examine their relationship under different circumstances and to dissociate two forms of nonconformity: individually oriented vs. collectively oriented. Study 1 demonstrates that thinking about how a group norm may cause individual harm triggers a type of nonconformity that is associated with disengagement from the group, whereas thinking about how a norm may cause collective harm triggers a type of nonconformity that is not associated with disengagement. Study 2 investigates the relationship between nonconformity and disengagement among group members that vary in their level of collective identification. We demonstrate that whereas nonconformity among weakly identified group members is associated with disengagement, this is not the case among strong identifiers.

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In experiments that were to dramatically shape subsequent social influence research, Solomon Asch observed something startling. In the presence of a unanimous set of other people making obviously incorrect decisions, a certain proportion of the time many participants altered their responses to match those of the group. However, most of the time, most participants did not alter their responses, and some participants never did (Asch, 1951, 1955, 1956). To these two behaviors, Asch gave labels that were heavy with connotation. He referred to the former as 'yielding' or 'submission'; the latter he simply called 'independence'. Although Asch likely did not intend for them to do so (see Levine, 1999), these terms go beyond the observations and capture both a behavior and imply an explanation. In the case of submission, the behavior is conformity, and the implied explanation is one of *giving in* to others. In the case of independence, the behavior is nonconformity, and the implied explanation is *autonomy* or separation from others.

The amount of empirical attention subsequently devoted to the process(es) that actually underlie conformity and nonconformity is strikingly discrepant. Conformity has received the lion's share of the attention, and a diversity of contributing psychological mechanisms have been elucidated. As a result, whatever explanatory connotations were implied by Asch's original descriptors have been surpassed, and our understanding of conformity has moved well beyond submission alone. We know that yielding is indeed an important type of conformity, and that conformity can be motivated by a desire to meet the expectations or desires of others (normative influence; e.g., Bond &

Smith, 1996; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Kaplan & Miller, 1987). However, we also know that conformity can be caused by a reliance on others for information about reality (informational influence; e.g., Baron, Vandello, & Brunsman, 1996; Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, & Welch, 1992; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955), and by goals to maintain social solidarity and coherent collective identities (social identification; e.g., Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner, 1990; Terry & Hogg, 1996). Conformity is, in other words, understood as a multifaceted phenomenon with multiple and interactive causes.

In contrast, comparatively little research has addressed the mechanisms affording nonconformist behavior (but see Blanton & Christie, 2003; Hodges & Geyer, 2006; Morrison & Miller, 2008; Nail, Macdonald, & Levy, 2000). Nonconformity has often, at least tacitly, been accounted for by the absence of factors known to trigger conformity: a lack of concern for others' impressions, little reliance on or trust of others for information, and low levels of interest in social identities and collective solidarity. Each of these absences entails the mechanism implied by the term independence: a separation of the individual from others.[1] Nonconformity is linked to autonomy and disengagement, and the dissenter is understood as typically standing apart, a lone wolf (e.g., Cohen, 1966; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953;

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[1] That psychologists have understood independence in these terms is evidenced by the other sub-field in which this word labels a key construct. According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), whose model of independent vs. interdependent self-construals has shaped recent cross-cultural psychology, independent selves can be defined as "individualist, egocentric, separate, autonomous, idiocentric, and self-contained" (p. 226).

Moscovici, 1976— see Hodges & Geyer, 2006; Hornsey, 2006; Levine, 1999 for discussion).

Interestingly, this was not how Asch himself conceptualized nonconformity, and it was not what he meant by independence. To him, independence was motivated not by a desire for autonomy or distinctiveness, but rather by a desire to help a group reach optimal decisions. Rather than being self or individually oriented, Asch believed that nonconformity was a group oriented behavior (Levine, 1999). This conceptualization squares with a great deal of research demonstrating that nonconformity bestows collective benefits, improving group decision-making, increasing creativity and innovation, and reducing polarization (e.g., Brodbeck, Kerschriter, Mojzisch, Frey, & Schulz-Hardt, 2002; De Dreu, 2002; Janis, 1972; Postmes, Spears, & Cihangir, 2001). It is, however, difficult to account for this type of connected independence solely in terms of the absence of processes that are known to trigger conformity, each of which, as noted, implies social separation (Packer, 2011).

Recently, social psychologists have begun to attend to the likelihood that nonconformity is driven by its own set of psychological processes, and to the possibility that there are multiple forms of nonconformity. In particular, researchers have returned to Asch's notion of a connected independence (see also Kelley & Shapiro, 1954), positing that expressing divergent perspectives is a means of engaging with others and, in particular, with important social groups (e.g., Crane & Platow, 2010; Hornsey, 2006; Packer, 2008; Reicher, 2004; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006). As such, recent studies have found that group members, particularly those who are strongly identified with a group, are willing to express disagreement with collective decisions and behaviors when they are perceived to be at odds with collective interests (e.g., Packer, 2009; Packer & Chasteen, 2010) or discrepant from the group's ideals (e.g., Crane & Platow, 2010; Roccas et al., 2006).

In the current research, we test the prediction that in certain circumstances nonconformity can reflect engagement with rather than disengagement from social groups. We view disengagement as a process in which group members distance themselves from the group (see Packer, 2008, 2011). In social identity terms, disengagement reflects a reduction in the extent to which the self is conceptualized or categorized at the level of the group. Importantly, some forms of nonconformity likely reflect or are closely associated with disengagement — in some situations group members may reduce the extent to which they conform to group norms because they grow indifferent to those norms or actively want to separate the self from the group. However, we contend that in other situations group members may reduce conformity to group norms even as they maintain a sense of connection to the collective. Thus, acts of nonconformity that might appear indistinguishable on the surface may, in reality, reflect very different psychological states: independence on the one hand, connectedness on the other.

Although some extant research is circumstantially consistent with the prediction that nonconformity can reflect engagement with rather than disengagement from social groups, there is, to our knowledge, no direct evidence for this. Sani and colleagues, for example, have conducted a series of studies examining factors that predict when members are likely to secede from a group — a strong form of disengagement (Sani, 2005; Sani & Reicher, 1998, 1999; Sani & Todman, 2002). They have found that group members who oppose a forthcoming change to group norms are more likely to remain part of the group (vs. join a schism) if they believe that they will be respected and retain the right to speak out, conditions that Sani and colleagues termed 'voice'. Group members who do not believe that they will have voice, in contrast, are more likely to exit the group. These findings are consistent with the prediction that nonconformity can be associated with continued collective engagement. However, it is important to note that voice does not represent nonconformity per se, but rather expectations about the social consequences of nonconformity. Voice was indexed with items such as

"those opposing [normative change] are accepted as full and equal members of [group]" (e.g., Sani, 2005). Defined in these terms, voice may encourage nonconformity, but does not guarantee it, and nonconformity and voice are by no means synonymous. As such, it remains an open question as to how expressions of nonconformity themselves relate to collective engagement.

Current research

As yet, researchers have not provided participants in the same study with separate measures of nonconformity and disengagement to directly investigate their relationship under different circumstances. The current research was designed to fill this lacuna. We predict that nonconformity takes multiple forms, motivated for different reasons. At times and among some group members, it likely reflects a distancing of the self from the group. At other times and among other members, it may reflect a continued engagement with the collective.

We present two studies containing indices of both nonconformity and disengagement in order to dissociate two different forms of nonconformity: group oriented vs. individually oriented. Study 1 investigated how the relationship between nonconformity and collective engagement is affected by variation in which aspects or consequences of a group norm trigger nonconformity. We predicted that nonconformity triggered by concerns about how a group norm may cause personal/individual harm was likely to reflect an autonomous, separating type of independence and, as such, would be associated with disengagement from the group. In contrast, we predicted that nonconformity triggered by concerns about how a group norm may harm the collective was likely to reflect Asch's connected independence and, as such, would not be associated with disengagement from the group.

Study 1

Methods

Participants

Participants were 100 undergraduate psychology students at The Ohio State University (OSU) who participated for extra course credit. There were 54 males and 45 females (1 did not provide demographic information), with a mean age of 18.95 years ($SD = 1.34$).

Procedure

Participants were run in groups of up to six, and measures were administered (individually) on computers using MediaLab presentation software. All participants were provided with information regarding a pro-alcohol norm among students at OSU. A short passage indicated (consistent with pilot-testing) that most students on campus held positive attitudes toward drinking, and concluded with the statement that "it seems fair to say that there is a drinking culture among students at OSU".

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In a collective harm condition, participants were asked to spend a few minutes (self-timed) thinking and writing about possible reasons why the "drinking culture at OSU may have harmful consequences for the university". In an individual harm condition, participants were asked to think and write about possible reasons why "a drinking culture may have harmful consequences for individuals…including you personally". Finally, in a control condition, participants did not reflect or write about potentially harmful aspects of the norm before continuing to subsequent measures.

All participants then completed a measure of willingness to express counter-normative views regarding the pro-alcohol norm. Immediately after the nonconformity measure, participants completed an index assessing disengagement from the university. The study concluded with a manipulation check, a demographics questionnaire, and a thorough debriefing, which challenged the actual strength of the drinking