Do Children Conform? Conformity Behaviors in Children Aged Two Through Five

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Abstract

Prior research suggests that conformity begins during childhood, but conformity behaviors may differ as a function of age and other demographic characteristics of the child (e.g., gender). The current study was designed to investigate whether conformity behaviors occur with toddlers and children in early childhood. Data was collected from 32 participants from two daycare locations in the Midwestern U.S. Each child was placed in a group with three of their peers and given an image set of different sized dogs. However, one child in the group received images that differed from the others in their group. Participants were asked to indicate which of their images matched a sample image. Results from this study suggest that toddlers and children in early childhood do not experience strong pressures to conform to the group norm, as none of the children in the current study modified their responses to align with others in their group. The lack of findings from the current study contradicts prior studies, which suggested that conformity does exist in early childhood. The current study suggests that conformity behaviors may evolve over time and conformity may be less likely with younger children.

Keywords: conformity, early childhood, education, social behavior

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Conformity is a powerful driving force that is found across cultures (e.g., Sistrunk, Clement, & Guenther, 1971; Jiang, Bong, & Kim, 2015). Conformity occurs when one's behavior or attitude becomes consistent with the attitudes or behaviors of their surrounding group, whether these consistencies occur under real or imaginary pressures from the group (Zhang, Zhang, Mu, & Liu, 2017). Historically, some have even argued that human survival results from an individual's ability to conform in a way that supports the group or society (Schillaci & Kelemen, 2014). In contemporary society, conformity is often utilized by humans to make their social behaviors more convenient and effective, while also ensuring that they meet the expectations of others within their society or culture (Over & Carpenter, 2011). For example, in middle- and upper-class families in the U.S., a person may conform to the group norm and societal pressure. This individual would be labeled as a fully functioning adult after completing a degree, getting a job, and paying their bills.

As one of the original examples of conformity and as a leader in the conversation surrounding conformity during adulthood, the Asch (1956) study

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assessed conformity among adults. Nine individuals were asked to participate in what they believed to be an experiment on visual discrimination. In a group setting, the participants were all shown multiple lines of varying lengths on a board. They were asked to match the length of one line with one of the other lines shown. However, eight of the group members were confederates and instructed to provide an incorrect answer to the line matching question. Results from this original study illustrated how participants were more likely to knowingly choose an incorrect answer when their group members gave incorrect answers (Asch, 1956). Researchers concluded that adults feel a powerful pressure to conform in group-based settings.

Most studies have explored conformity within adult populations (Asch, 1956; Stallen et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2014). There are also many studies that suggest conformity appears earlier in the lifespan, such as during childhood and adolescence (Hamm & Hoving, 1969; Haun & Tomasello 2011; Over & Carpenter, 2011; Stein, 2016; Zhang et al., 2017). For instance, Over and Carpenter (2011) discuss how social pressures can be found in early childhood, where children aged five may use conformity to fit into the group norm. Interestingly, conformity and the pressures associated with it can be felt by an individual even in the absence of observable conformity pressures from one's peers (Over & Carpenter, 2011). Zhang and colleagues (2017) suggest that conformity pressures may appear as early as age three, and these societal pressures can often increase as one ages into middle childhood, adolescence, and then adulthood. There has been limited recent literature on conformity during early childhood, and the researchers of this study seek to add to the literature.

Conformity During Early Childhood

The age at which a child begins to display conformity has been debated in research studies that explore social behaviors across the lifespan. Some researchers suggest that conformity is innate in humans upon birth (Stein, 2016), while others claim that conformity appears around age three (Flynn, Turner, & Giraldeau, 2018; Haun & Tomasello, 2011; Schillaci & Kelemen, 2014; Zhang et al., 2017). Some of this confusion surrounding conformity and its developmental trajectory during childhood might result from difficulties in measuring this phenomenon. For example, many conformity studies modify data collection methods that were originally intended for adults to make them more age-appropriate for children in early and middle childhood. Not having a conformity measure created for this age group neglects the immense differences in social behaviors and interactions between adults and children. If conformity is a multifaceted phenomenon, these instrument adaptations may result in measurements of varied aspects or types of conformity. In addition, conformity likely varies as a result of cultural and social context, and consequently, subtle differences in cultural and social contexts may result in varied conclusions about where and when conformity occurs. It is also likely that conformity occurs because of many social factors including the persons physical demeanor, language used, and tone used. If it were true that conformity is indeed multifaced, then this would support the idea that conformity involves several interactions between traits.

For example, in Flynn, Turner, and Giraldeau's (2018) study, they asked 168

children between the ages of three and five to watch an adult choose a box with an underwhelming prize inside it. The children were then asked to choose a box with a prize that they wanted to keep for themselves. The researchers were assessing whether the children would conform and choose the same box that the adult did or whether the children would choose a second box and receive a different prize. The younger, three-year-old children selected the same box as the adult more often than the five-year-old children. This suggests that conformity might be more likely to occur at the end of toddlerhood, or beginning of early childhood, when compared with later stages of early childhood. Further validating these conclusions, Schillaci and Kelemen (2014) found that three-year-old children were more likely to conform than four-year-old children. This is likely due to the maturation of the child's cognitive process and also because of their social development.

Researchers have investigated whether the age of the majority of group members might impact whether a child conforms. In one study, researchers recruited 120 children between the ages of four and a half and six and a half to view tasks that were being completed by a majority group of children who were either younger, older, or the same age as the participant. The majority group contained four members. Regardless of the age group of the majority children, each member of the majority was asked to complete a series of tasks in an ineffective way. Consequently, the target child (participant) would watch another group of children ineffectively complete a series of tasks. The researchers then assessed whether the target participant would copy the ineffective actions of the majority children, or if the target participants would come up with their own solution to the tasks. They found that the target participant was more likely to copy the majority group members when the majority group was older or the same age as the participant. The participants were less likely to copy the majority group members when the majority was younger than the participant (McGuigan & Burgess, 2017). Therefore, the age and other demographics of the majority group members may impact whether a child conforms to the social behavior of the majority.

Conformity Beyond Early Childhood

Conformity has also been explored in older children and adults to determine whether individuals of varying ages might differently experience social pressures to conform to the larger group. Researchers Hamm and Hoving (1969) modified the autokinetic judgment effect, a research method typically used on adults (see Sherif's 1937 study), to study conformity in children. Their study included 216 children aged seven, ten, and thirteen. Children were incorrectly told that a light on a projected screen was moving, when it actually was not moving. When alone, all the child participants reported seeing the light move around two inches. However, when the children were placed into larger groups of three children who were their same age and gender, the participants instead indicated that the light had moved further than two inches. Furthermore, the seven-year-old children were less likely to conform than the 10 and 13-year-old children. As a whole, these prior studies suggest that conformity pressure may not be consistent across early and middle childhood. Instead, the societal pull to conform may begin during toddlerhood, lie dormant during the beginning of middle childhood (around ages 6-8), and then awaken

during pre-teen years (ages 10 and older). Other studies highlight how conformity pressures might increase as children move into pre-teen years.

Zhang and colleagues (2017) studied 295 students aged 9 to 15. The researchers placed each individual participant in a room with a computer. Participants were asked to select which picture matched in size with the other pictures shown to the child. The children were told that they were in a group of four, but that each child was in a room with their own computers. Each participant was asked to identify if two images were the same size and, at the same time, the decisions from the other student group members were provided at the bottom of the computer screen. After witnessing what their group members had selected, the participants were given the opportunity to change their answers. As an added element, participants were assigned to one of two conditions: 1) the participant was told that their answer was going to remain confidential from their group, or 2) the participant was told that their answer was going to be made public to the group. The researchers found that older children, compared with younger children, display more conformity, but only if the children had to make their decision public. These findings highlight how decisions to conform, at least with older children and pre-teen children, may be impacted by a fear of shame for providing the incorrect answer or other repercussions from one's society that results from going against the group norm.

Taken together, the prior literature illustrates how the pressure to conform may vary across different stages of development, e.g., early childhood. The previous literature also demonstrates the complexity of conformity. Not only are people conforming to their peers, based on their social and cultural situation, but the strength of conformity can differ. Further complicating the phenomenon of conformity, other studies suggest that personal demographics, such as gender, might also impact conformity during childhood.

Gender Differences in Conformity

Prior studies find that females are more likely to conform than males (Costanzo & Shaw, 1966; Hamm & Hoving, 1969; Iscoe & Williams, 1963). For example, Iscoe and Williams (1963) found that female children under age 12 conformed significantly more often than male children when placed in groups of three. In addition, Hamm and Hoving, (1969) found similar results with their sample of 7, 10, and 13-year-old children. When placed in groups of three, the females in the study were significantly more likely to conform than males of the same age. A more recent study conducted by Haun and Tomasello (2011) extended these prior findings to a younger participant group. In their experiment, the researchers recruited 96 children, age four, and put them in groups of four. In their group, participants were given a book of images and asked to point (silent) or speak (verbal) to the tiger that was the same size as the one on the other side of the book. The results suggested that female preschool-aged children were significantly more likely to conform than males.

Similar results were also present in a study by Zhang and colleagues (2017). The researchers used similar data collection methods and a similar design to that used by Haun and Tomasello (2011), but they instead recruited participants ages 9 to 15. The researchers asked participants to determine if the pair of pictures shown on

the left side of the screen were all the same size. While making their decisions, the answers from the other three students appeared on the right side of the screen. They also found female participants conformed significantly more than males. Overall, this prior literature suggests that female children are more likely to conform than male children of the same age. Consequently, both the age of the participant and their gender may impact whether they are likely to conform in group-based environments.

Current Study

The following research questions guided the current study:

1. At what age during toddlerhood and early childhood do children begin to show signs of conformity?

Hypothesis 1A: The author hypothesized that the two- and three-year-old children would be more likely to conform to their peers than the four- and five-year-old children. Prior literature finds that toddlers have shown conformity at higher levels than those in early childhood (Schillaci & Kelemen, 2014; Flynn, Turner, & Giraldeau, 2018).

2. Does conformity during toddlerhood and early childhood differ based on gender?

Hypothesis 2A: Based on the prior literature finding gender differences in conformity (Costanzo & Shaw, 1966; Hamm & Hoving, 1969; Iscoe & Williams, 1963; Haun & Tomasello, 2011; Zhang et al., 2017), it was hypothesized that there would be a significant difference based on gender, where the female participants would conform more often than the male participants.

The current study was a close replication of Haun and Tomasello's (2011) study, but with fewer participants, a wider age range, and slightly modified procedures. The 2011 study contained four-year-old children in groups of four, sitting in a booth with dividers between one another. The groups were mixed gender and there was a target child that had a different book given to them than the other three participants. Their original study aimed to determine if the target child would conform to the other children's answers or answer in response to their own book. The current study also included children beyond the age of four.

Method

Participants

There was a total of 32 participants in this study, with eight groups of four participants for each age bracket. The researcher contacted the daycare center where I was invited to come to their classrooms and conduct the experiment. Parental consent was obtained from participants prior to data collection and participants were told that they could end the study at any point. Participants ages ranged from two through five, with most children participating in groups with those of the same age as them (see Figure 1).

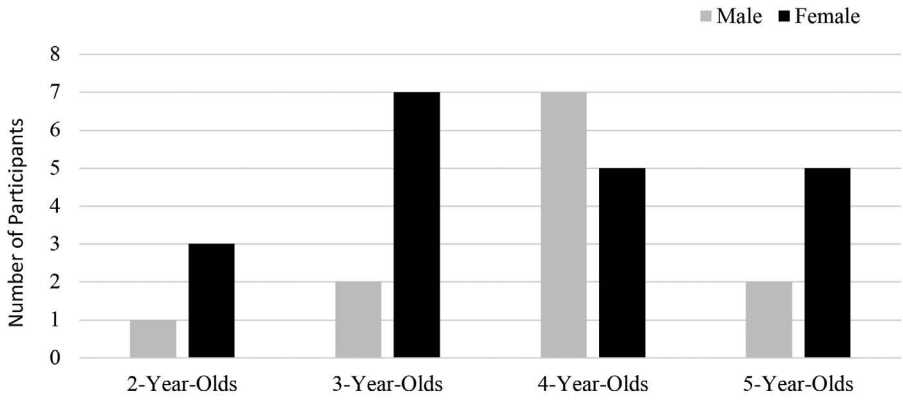

Figure 1: Age and sex of participants.

Participants were sampled from two daycare centers located on a university campus. All participants spoke English as a first language and were currently living in the Midwestern region of the U.S. Children in each participant group attended the same daycare/preschool center, and the children knew each other from their prior daycare experiences.

Materials

A set of pictures were created to be used with the two- to five-year-old children (see Figure 2). This set of pictures contained three images of a dog of different sizes, then on the adjacent page, there was a copied photo of one of the dogs.

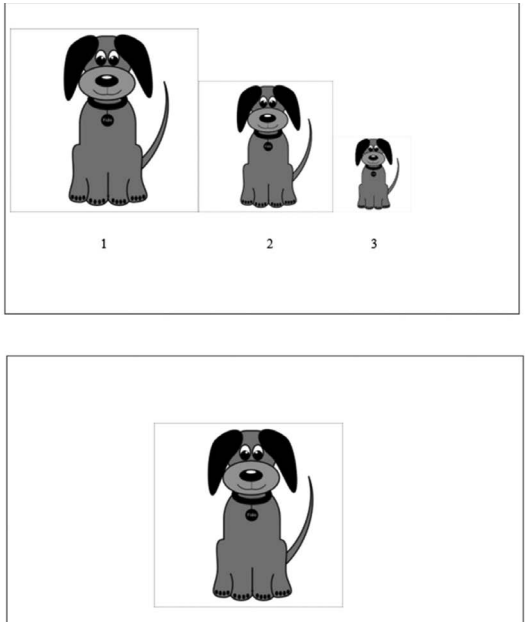

Figure 2: Dog pictures used to assess conformity.

Procedure

Data was gathered in the children's daycare center to maintain a familiar environment. The participants were brought to either a gathering room of the building or to a table outside of their classroom where they would typically have a snack. This location differed based on which center the children attended. The children were then told to sit in a chair and asked to play a game. The researcher gave instructions to the children on how to play the game and asked the children if they had any questions before beginning the game. Each group of participants contained four children, and each child participated in both Phase I and II of the study. Four children sat in a row with dividers between them so they could not see

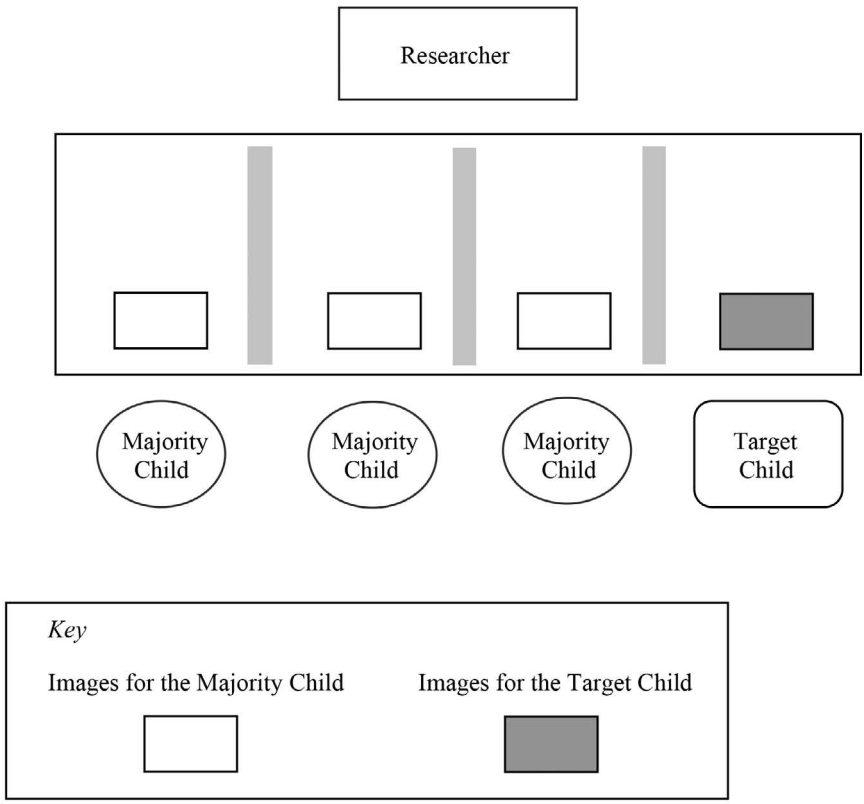

Figure 3: Procedure Set-Up Illustrating the Table with Four Participants.

what other children were viewing in their group (see Figure 3).

In Phase I of the current study, each child was given an image set of different size dogs. The image set contained two pages, with one page containing three dogs of varying sizes and the other page contained one dog that matched the size of a dog on the adjacent page. Participants were asked to match the images on the pages silently. To do this the participants were asked to point silently to the dog they believed best matched the other image.

Children were also randomly divided into two conditions: The *majority* child condition and the *target* child condition. The first three participants were labeled as the majority participants and were given the same set of pictures as one another, whereas the target child was the last child in the group. The target child received a set of pictures that were slightly different from the other three. For example, while the majority children had a picture with a small dog, the target child had a picture of a large dog. The participants were then asked to indicate which picture from the first image set matched the picture on the second page.

All four children in each group completed the first three rounds of matching with the same set of images to serve as a control or baseline level of data for the study. There were three trials of the child sitting and silently pointing to the image of the dog that matched the dog on the second page. For each trial of the silent pointing, the child received a new image set.

In Phase II, the children received a new set of images and sat in a row facing the researcher with dividers between each child. Instead of silently pointing to the matching image, the children were asked to verbally state the size of dog that matched best. The majority children had identical image sets, while the target child had a different image set. The children then went down the line and verbally stated which dog matched (small, medium, or big). There were three spoken trials for each group with different image sets in each trial. For each group, the image sets for every trial remained on the same rotation.

After the study was completed, each child was debriefed about the true intentions of the study, which was to test their level of conformity relative to their peers. Each child was then given a sticker as a reward for their participation in the study. All children received a sticker, regardless of whether they completed the study or not.

Results

All of the children participated in each round of the matching game. However, out of the eight trials conducted, none of the participants (n = 0 out of 32) displayed conformity as measured by the matching task, regardless of their age or gender. Consequently, additional analyses were not conducted to assess whether conformity might differ based on the child's age or gender.

However, it should be noted that there was one occurrence of a two-year-old female child conforming to the group, but the conformity displayed by the child did not fit under the definition of conformity that was set up in the introduction and methodology of the current study. One of the majority children peeked at the target child's photo before giving their answer, and although their image was different from the target, the participant gave the target child's image as their answer. As an example of what occurred, Jon Doe looked at Jane Doe's picture prior to speaking. Jane Doe had the large image of the dog, while Jon Doe had the medium image of the dog. The researcher asked Jon Doe what size they believed the dog in front of them was, and Jon Doe said large, even though he really had an image of a medium dog. Since this *peeking conformity* occurred only once and did not align with the researcher's definition of conformity for the current study, the researcher was unable to suggest that conformity occurred. In addition, there was another group that was ended early

after a child asked to be removed from the study due to being unable to focus and sit long enough to complete the study.

Discussion

The current study did not find conformity among children between the ages of two and five. These results did not support any of the original hypotheses, which contradicts prior studies suggesting that toddlers display greater conformity than those in early childhood (Costanzo & Shaw, 1966; Flynn, Turner, & Giraldeau, 2018; Hamm & Hoving, 1969; Haun & Tomasello, 2011; Iscoe & Williams, 1963; Schillaci & Kelemen, 2014; Zhang et al., 2017). In addition, because conformity behaviors were not shown, conformity did not differ based on gender. This contradicts previous literature, which suggested that female participants conform more often than male participants (Costanzo & Shaw, 1966; Hamm & Hoving, 1969; Iscoe & Williams, 1963; Haun & Tomasello, 2011; Zhang et al., 2017). The lack of conformity found in the current study might result from one of two circumstances: differences in the data collection methods used in the current and prior studies, and a deficit in participant motivation to engage with the matching game.

Methodological Differences Between Studies

One major difference between the current study and Haun and Tomasello's (2011) study is the number of participants in each. The 2011 study included 96 participants, whereas the current study included 32 participants. The collection of data from more participants would have been beneficial to the current study because conformity might exist as a rarer phenomenon amongst contemporary toddlers and children in early childhood. Another difference in methods between the two studies is that the original study contained a total of 30 trials which is significantly more than the 6 trials completed in the current study. The researcher of the current study was unable to conduct as many trials due to time conflicts as well as attention span difficulties amongst the children. The ability to conduct additional trials (beyond those conducted in the current study) may have influenced the outcome of Haun and Tomasello's study because it allows more opportunities for conformity to occur amongst the children. However, although the current study included fewer trials to test for conformity, the fact that conformity did not occur was also interesting and this finding could contribute to psychologists' understanding of conformity, or the lack thereof, across the lifespan.

Haun and Tomasello (2011) used significantly more trials compared to the current researcher. Among these extra trials were "no-conflict trials". This means that all children had the same size tiger in their picture, including the target child. The difference between the two studies is that the original study contained four different conditions while the current study only contained two conditions. Having a condition in the middle where all children spoke and had the same set of images may have been beneficial because it could have helped the children to believe they were all getting the correct answers before switching to the target child's images. This trial would have aided in the confidence of the participant's answers and in turn may have persuaded them to conform to their peers. Early childhood is a time where children

find themselves learning by observing then imitating (Tomasello, 1999); perhaps the extra trials would have allowed the child to observe what others were saying and want to imitate their peers, thus leading to conformity. The current study did not include a speak-no-conflict condition to their study, which may have resulted in a lack of conformity. The researchers also suggest that it may have been as simple as the child being unable to adequately hear their peers.

Lack of Conformity Due to Participant Motivation and Attention Difficulties

Other explanations for the lack of conformity might include a variety of different participant motivations and the difficulties that young children experience in focusing their attention on one task for a prolonged period. The participants of the present study were informed that they would receive a sticker for playing the game. Since there was a reward that they were aware of prior to completion, this may have influenced how they gave their answers. The participants may have wanted to give the correct answer regardless of what the others in the group gave for answers to ensure they received a sticker. While it was never explicitly told to the participants that they must answer correctly in order to receive a sticker, the researcher did say, "If you all play the game, you get a sticker." The sticker could have been perceived as a low-stakes reward for some of the children in the group.

Another factor to consider when seeking to answer why conformity was not found in the current study is to observe the time of day the study was completed. Data was collected directly after the participant's snack time. This time of day proved to be a difficult time to retain the children's attention for very long. The children would wake up from a nap and have a snack, after which the researcher would begin to conduct their study. After snack, the children were restless, and it was difficult for them to sit in one spot for a long period of time. The researcher tried to account for this by taking a break in the middle of the study to stand up and "shake out the crazies" but found that the children still had a difficult time paying attention. The researcher also asked the participants to "turn on their listening ears" to what the other children were saying, but in many cases, it seemed that some of the children were distracted. The time of day in which the data was collected for this study may have dramatically impacted participants' motivation to engage with the matching game.

Due to the inherent limitations of the current study, future research should look at how both the methodology of the study and the motivation of the participant might impact illustrations of conformity. For instance, the time of day may affect conformity, and research should explore whether children of varying ages are more likely to conform in the morning, afternoon, or evening. Based on the small sample size, future research should see if this can be replicated.

Conclusions

Although the current study was a close replication to Haun and Tomasello's (2011) study, conformity was not found amongst the participants in the current study. The current study demonstrates that conformity might not always be found in children between the ages of two and five. Conformity has been explored by

renowned psychologists such as Sullivan Asch (1956) or Haun and Tomasello (2011). Conformity is also considered a natural occurring phenomenon that continues throughout a person's lifespan (Schillaci & Kelemen, 2014). However, the lack of conformity in this study suggests that conformity may not exist in the lives of toddlers and children in early childhood. It is possible that conformity may not exist in early childhood or conformity pressures may be stronger as children develop a greater awareness of their social environment.

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