Learning and Individual Differences xxx (2015) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Learning and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/lindif

Conformity of Korean adolescents in their perceptions of social relationships and academic motivation

Yi Jiang, Mimi Bong *, Sung-il Kim

Department of Education and bMRI (Brain and Motivation Research Institute), Korea University, 145 Anam-ro, Seongbuk-gu, Seoul 136-701, Republic of Korea

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 12 August 2014
Received in revised form 22 April 2015
Accepted 30 April 2015
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Conformity
Perceived social support
Motivation
Achievement goals
Classroom affect
Academic achievement

ABSTRACT

We tested the relationship between conformity and the perceptions of social support, academic motivation, and achievement held by Korean adolescents across two studies. Conformity had positive relationships with perceived closeness with parents, parental achievement pressure, and feelings of guilt toward parents. Conformity was also positively linked to perceived support from teachers and peers, student mastery-approach goals, and achievement in the specific domains of English and mathematics. Mastery-approach goals related positively to positive classroom affect in both subjects and to achievement scores in English. The relationship of conformity with student motivation and affect was largely mediated by perception of social support. These findings indicate that adolescents with stronger conformity, at least in the collectivistic Korean culture, benefit more by maintaining a close relationship with their teachers. The merits of conforming, therefore, appear to be most significant in learning environments where students feel supported.

1. Introduction

The distinction between individualism and collectivism is considered important in the understanding of cultural orientation because of its impact on individuals' cognition, emotions, and motivation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Individualistic cultures emphasize the distinctiveness and independence of individuals from one another, while collectivistic cultures stress compliance with group norms and interdependence among group members. In general, countries in North America and Western Europe are considered to represent individualistic cultures, and those in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and parts of Europe are considered collectivistic (Triandis, 1993).

Whereas members of individualistic cultures value their unique inner attributes and strive for personal accomplishment, those of collectivistic cultures deem group success and group harmony more important than individual achievement (Triandis, 1995). Individuals in collectivistic cultures tend to pay greater attention to, and be more strongly influenced by, the opinions of their in-group members because an accurate understanding of the self can only be achieved in relation to significant others in their social network (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Personality traits such as conformity may thus be highly valued and functionally adaptive in collectivistic cultures.

Following the classic experiments of Asch (1956), who demonstrated that college students acquiesced to the judgment of the majority even in cases where the judgment was clearly faulty, researchers have been interested in the role of conformity in social motivational behavior. Epley and Gilovich (1999) showed that simply priming college students with words related to conformity (e.g., adhere, agree, comply, conform) was enough to encourage them to conform to a greater extent compared to those who were not primed or who were primed with words related to nonconformity (e.g., challenge, confront, counter, defy). More recently, the experiments of Haun and Tomasello (2011) demonstrated that children as young as four years old were likely to conform to clearly erroneous opinions of their peers, especially when they had to let their opinions known to others.

It is reasonable to assume, then, that collectivistic cultures, with their numerous implicit and explicit cues for conformity, would be more likely to produce individuals who align their perceptions and behavior to group norms than would individualistic cultures. Given the inherently social nature of the construct and its proven effect on perceptual and behavioral changes, we expected conformity to play an important role in determining the perceptions and motivation of adolescents in collectivistic cultures. We thus examined the role of conformity in student perceptions of social contexts and student motivation across two studies. In Study 1, we examined how conformity related to the perceived relationship with parents, perceived support from teachers and peers, student achievement goals, classroom affect, and achievement. We assessed multiple dimensions of the parent–child relationship, including thankfulness, respect, closeness, conflict, and guilt toward parents. In Study 2, we focused specifically on perceived parental achievement pressure instead of tapping the multifaceted aspects of the parent–child relationship investigated in Study 1.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: jiangyousauce@hotmail.com (Y. Jiang), mimibong@korea.ac.kr (M. Bong), sungkim@korea.ac.kr (S. Kim).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2015.04.012
1041-6080/© 2015 Published by Elsevier Inc.

1.1. Definition and general characteristics of conformity

In general, conformity refers to the act of matching one's attitudes and behaviors to those of the majority, even when the majority response is contradictory to one's personal beliefs. It is also possible for a person to suppress certain behaviors for fear of being negatively judged by other group members, which is called "conformity by omission" (Sorrels & Kelley, 1984). Whether conformity is manifested as an altered response or the inhibition of a genuine response, its purpose is to allow an individual to keep in line with the majority.

Cialdini and Trost (1998) considered conforming to be a goal-directed behavior and distinguished three possible motivations: (1) "the goal of effective action" (p. 162), representing conforming to others' opinions in an attempt to make more accurate and valid judgments; (2) "the goal of building and maintaining social relationships" (p. 166), representing conforming to gain approval and acceptance; and (3) "the goal of managing self-concept" (p. 168), representing conforming to avoid a negative self-image. Levels of compliance can change depending on the characteristics of the task (difficulty, complexity, subjectivity, and prior commitment), the group (size, cohesion, credibility, and similarity between the group and the individual), and the individual (inclination to conform, social anxiety, need for affiliation, and fear of negative evaluation).

The fact that individuals can conform subconsciously without the presence of explicit cues or pressure (Epley & Gilovich, 1999) suggests that it may be potentially beneficial or even desirable to do so. However, evidence has not been conclusive. Campbell (1975) pointed out that conformity has traditionally been regarded as a personal weakness, representing the inability to maintain beliefs and perceptions in the face of social pressure. In contrast, Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggested that, in collectivistic cultures, conformity is considered a virtue as it strengthens relationships with significant others and ensures group harmony.

1.2. Conformity in individualistic and collectivistic cultures

Kim and Markus (1999) subsequently demonstrated that whether conformity is regarded as desirable or not depends on cultural values. They stated: "Uniqueness has positive connotations of freedom and independence in American culture, whereas conformity has positive connotations of connectedness and harmony in East Asian culture" (p. 785). The authors proposed that cultural values exert a profound influence on the personal preference for uniqueness or conformity. Supporting their conjecture, when presented with five pens of two different colors, one common and the other less common (i.e., either 3 pens of one color and 2 of another, or 4 pens of one color and 1 of another), East Asians more commonly chose the pen of the majority color than Americans did. The authors concluded that individuals in East Asian cultures avoid nonconformity because it is usually recognized as deviance, while those in Western cultures perceive nonconformity as an expression of uniqueness.

Collectivistic cultures, especially those in East Asian countries, emphasize harmonious interdependence among their social members (Triandis, 1995). Conformity in these cultures is, therefore, a functionally adaptive and valued characteristic. A meta-analysis by Bond and Smith (1996) found that the levels of conformity were significantly higher when the study samples came from collectivistic rather than individualistic countries. In countries such as Korea, China, and Japan, individuals with high levels of conformity are even regarded as more mature (Markus & Kitayama, 1994).

A study by Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, Butner, and Gornik-Durose (1999) also documented differences in compliance behavior between individualistic and collectivistic individuals. By comparing the responses of college students in the United States and Poland (representing individualistic and collectivistic cultures, respectively) to a hypothetical compliance scenario, the investigators showed that, while the general culture of the nation was important in determining the degree of compliance among its members, more important was the orientation of individual members toward individualism or collectivism. They also demonstrated that collectivistic individuals' decisions to comply were significantly influenced by information regarding the compliance of others to similar requests. These results indicate that the main reason to conform for collectivistic individuals is to build and maintain positive social relationships (Cialdini & Trost, 1998) by behaving consistently with group norms.

2. Conformity and student motivation

2.1. Conformity and perceptions of social relationships

Although individuals with high levels of conformity may be thought to lack uniqueness and be less independent by the standards of individualistic Western societies (Kim & Markus, 1999), conformity to group norms is essential for groups to function smoothly. Perhaps for this reason, researchers studying social interaction within groups have reported that conformists are considered normal and desirable, whereas nonconformists are considered deviant and undesirable (Levine & Moreland, 1998). Behaviors and traits that are of a conforming and collectivistic nature are greeted more positively than those of an individualistic nature, especially under collectivistic group norms (Markus & Kitayama, 1994; McAuliffe, Jetten, Hornsey, & Hogg, 2003). This social evaluation of conformity could in turn lead individuals with varying levels of conformity to perceive their social–psychological environment differently.

Triandis, Leung, Villareal, and Clack (1985), for example, compared the social perceptions and judgments of allocentric and idiocentric individuals. Allocentrism represents an individual's psychological tendency toward cooperation and collectivism, and indiocentrism that toward individuality and individualism. As a personality trait, allocentrism is similar to conformity. The researchers found that there was a positive correlation between the allocentrism scores of individuals and the number of people from whom they could garner social support when needed. Allocentric individuals also reported greater satisfaction with the support they received from others (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988; Triandis et al., 1985). In collectivistic countries such as Korea, conforming individuals are thus more likely than nonconforming individuals to receive support, and thus they perceive their social environment to be more supportive.

For adolescents, conformity could make a difference in their perception of support from major social figures, including parents, teachers, and peers. East Asian adolescents in collectivistic cultures, presumably with an interdependent self (Heine, 2001), are sensitive to their parents' expectations and demonstrate a strong desire to satisfy their wishes. The parent–child relationship in East Asian countries is also believed to be more complex than typically perceived by Western culture (Chao & Tseng, 2002). Noting this complexity, researchers studying Asian adolescents often conceptualize the parent–child relationship as a multidimensional construct, encompassing support and achievement pressure, consequently followed by feelings of indebtedness, obligation, closeness, and conflict (Bong, 2008; Park & Kim, 2006). Whether conformity selectively or uniformly reinforces these multiple dimensions is an important question that needs to be addressed.

At the same time, adolescence is characterized by a diminishing dependence on parents, accompanied or replaced by a growing reliance on teachers and peers (Berndt, 1979). Perceived social support from teachers and peers is an important determinant of adolescent academic motivation, adjustment, and achievement at school (Wentzel, 1998). Because adolescents with high levels of conformity strive to maintain positive relationships and to avoid conflict with significant others in their social system, they are more likely to receive support in return from these social figures. Coupled with the general tendency of conforming individuals to sense greater levels and a higher quality of

Please cite this article as: Jiang, Y., et al., Conformity of Korean adolescents in their perceptions of social relationships and academic motivation, *Learning and Individual Differences* (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2015.04.012