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## Follow the crowd in a new direction: When conformity pressure facilitates group creativity (and when it does not)

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### ABSTRACT

Adopting a person by situation interaction approach, we identified conditions under which conformity pressure can either stifle or boost group creativity depending on the joint effects of norm content and group personality composition. Using a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  experimental design, we hypothesized and found that pressure to adhere to an individualistic norm boosted creativity in groups whose members scored low on the Creative Personality Scale (Gough, 1979), but stifled creativity in groups whose members scored high on that measure. Our findings suggest that conformity pressure may be a viable mechanism for boosting group creativity, but only among those who lack creative talent.

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### Introduction

To remain competitive, many organizations actively seek out creative ideas that may lead in profitable new directions (Amabile, 1996). A creative idea is defined as one that is both novel and useful (Amabile, 1983). The classical research on group creativity has assumed that because creative ideas are initially out of the ordinary, even deviant (Moscovici, 1976), pressure to conform to a group majority stifles creative expression (Crutchfield, 1962; Nemeth & Staw, 1989; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993). This argument reached its clearest and most extreme form in Nemeth and Staw (1989) who claimed that creativity and conformity are a direct one-to-one tradeoff; the freer people are to deviate from shared expectations, the more likely they are to suggest creative solutions.

A decade ago, Flynn and Chatman (2001) tried to turn the tables on this perspective by proposing that conformity pressure can reinforce creativity relevant norms and thereby increase rather than stifle creative performance. This alternative point of view on group creativity suggests a number of exciting possibilities. Yet ten years later, the empirical evidence that would either definitively support or refute this prediction has not materialized.

Indeed, the classical assumption that conformity necessarily stifles creative expression is a logic that many researchers of creativity still find appealing. For example, Sutton (2002) suggested that

to promote creativity firms should actively hire employees who break the rules and resist adapting to norms because these “misfits” offer new perspectives and initiate different solutions to problems. This logic is evident in a spate of recent research arguing that conformity pressure is useful for the implementation of new ideas, but stifles the generation of new ideas (Kaplan, Brooks-Shesler, King, & Zaccaro, 2009), that psychological states that reduce conformity also increase creative problem solving (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008), and that mere exposure to incidental cues representing conformity reduce individuals' ability to generate creative solutions on subsequent tasks (Forster, Friedman, Butterbach, & Sassenberg, 2005). Others are somewhat more optimistic and suggest that conformists may play a role in the creative process, but they do so by providing a supportive environment for their more creative counterparts rather than themselves being a source of creative ideas (Kaplan et al., 2009; Miron-Spektor, Erez, & Naveh, 2011).

In this paper, we seek to re-open the question of whether conformity pressure can be used as a tool to facilitate creative idea generation. Existing research has adopted a rather partisan approach with each side of the debate arguing that their point of view on the conformity–creativity relationship is the most obvious, logical and consistent with the available evidence (Flynn et al., 2001; Nemeth, 1997; Nemeth & Staw, 1989; Staw, 2009). Rather than fire yet another volley in one direction or the other, our objective is to specify the boundary conditions that make conformity pressure either a tool in the effort to promote creative expression or a stifling force that homogenizes thought and behavior. Specifically, we adopt a person-by-situation interaction approach (Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004) to investigate

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the joint effects of conformity pressure, norm content and group personality composition in order to specify more precisely when conformity can promote the expression of creative ideas and when it will not.

#### *Stand out or get out: conformity to an individualistic norm*

According to Flynn et al. (2001), those who argue that conformity pressure necessarily stifles creativity have not considered the possibility that the group may pressure people to comply with norms and expectations that are known to facilitate creative expression. If norm content and conformity pressure are considered separately, then it is possible to specify conditions under which conformity pressure can actually promote creativity by encouraging the regular expression of creativity enhancing behaviors such as the freedom to dissent (Hornsey, Jetten, McAuliffe, & Hogg, 2006). For example, an organization can create a norm that encourages the expression of dissenting opinions (content) and because everyone agrees the norm is important, those who believe that dissent should be silenced will be rejected by the group (conformity pressure).

There is some evidence to support this idea from research on organizational climate which shows that a strong climate supportive of innovation subsequently leads to higher rates of innovation (e.g. Gonzalez-Roma, Fortes-Ferreira, & Perio, 2009). Following the seminal article by Schneider, Salvaggio, and Subirats (2002), climate strength is defined and measured as the degree of agreement around a particular belief; the higher the level of agreement, the stronger the climate. Yet, though agreement alone may imply the presence of conformity pressure (Allen, 1965), groups may also reach agreement because people believe the majority point of view is accurate and not because they fear the threat of social sanctions (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). In other words, conformity should not be equated with agreement (Allen, 1965). Therefore, we focus specifically on conformity pressure to test the more extreme “strong norms” argument that groups can use the threat of rejection to reinforce norms that facilitate the expression of creative ideas (Flynn et al., 2001; O’Reilly and Chatman, 1996).

Research has identified a number of creativity relevant norms that facilitate creativity in groups and might have a more powerful effect on creative performance when they are reinforced by conformity pressure (Caldwell & O’Reilly, 2003). Here we focus on a particular norm, individualism–collectivism, because it speaks directly to the controversy over whether conformity pressure constrains creativity in groups. When individualism is the dominant orientation, persons tend to define themselves as independent of groups, autonomous, unique and guided by their personal goals and values (Jetten, Postmes, & McAuliffe, 2002). In contrast, in collectivist cultures, there is a strong emphasis on social goals, a feeling of interdependence and a concern to maintain harmony within groups (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

It has been argued that since creativity requires independence of thought and a willingness to diverge from the group to suggest a new idea that might not be readily accepted, then individualistic norms are an advantage when creativity is a desired outcome (see Goncalo & Krause, 2010 for a review). Although there is evidence that individualism promotes creative expression (Beersma & De Dreu, 2005; Goncalo & Kim, 2010; Goncalo & Staw, 2006; Mok & Morris, 2010; Wiekens & Stapel, 2008), the idea that conformity to a norm for individualism can promote creativity seems to some like an oxymoron (Staw, 2009). Indeed, Goncalo and Staw (2006) argued that individualism promotes creativity in groups precisely because it *reduces* conformity pressure in team settings. To wit, one of the most robust and well replicated findings in cross-cultural research is that the pressure to conform to a group majority

is stronger in collectivistic as opposed to individualistic cultures (Bond & Smith, 1996).

The problem with using Goncalo and Staw (2006) as evidence against the notion that conformity pressure can facilitate creativity, however, is that they did not differentiate between norm content (e.g., individualism) and conformity pressure (e.g., the extent to which members of a group agree that an individualistic norm is appropriate and are willing to reject or sanction people who do not comply with it) (Allen, 1965; Jackson, 1965; Mischel, 1968; O’Reilly and Chatman, 1996). Because cross-cultural studies have found that people are less likely to conform to individualistic as opposed to collectivistic cultures (Bond & Smith, 1996), one might immediately assume that people of individualistic groups do not conform to any shared expectation. Instead, they feel free to behave in any way they see fit.

Yet a growing number of studies cast doubt on this assumption by demonstrating that groups can exert conformity pressure by *agreeing* that individualism is appropriate and *rejecting* those who do not fit. For instance, a recent stream of research has shown that people are more likely to behave individualistically when they strongly identify with an individualistic group (Jetten et al., 2002), and that when group norms endorse individualism, people were more likely to value group members that displayed individualistic behaviors despite the fact that collectivistic behaviors were more likely to actually benefit the group (McAuliffe, Jetten, Hornsey, & Hogg, 2003). These findings demonstrate how individualistic behavior can result from conformity to salient group norms (Miller, 1999).

Applying this research to group creativity, it is possible that conformity pressure within individualistic groups might not stifle the behaviors that are necessary for such groups to be creative but make them more likely to emerge with regularity (Mischel, 1968). Without conformity pressure, it is possible that greater behavioral variability will emerge as people deviate from the norm to engage in behaviors that are not well aligned with the task environment (Sorenson, 2002). In contrast, since individualistic norms promote behaviors that stimulate creativity, such as the willingness to stand out from the group and to openly express dissenting points of view, creating pressure to conform to this type of norm, a norm that is appropriate to the task of generating creative ideas, should facilitate performance.

#### *How group creative personality composition influences the interaction between norm content and conformity pressure*

Once creativity-relevant norms (such as individualism–collectivism) have been identified (Caldwell & O’Reilly, 2003), it might be advisable for groups who desire creative performance to apply conformity pressure to ensure individuals will fall in line (Flynn et al., 2001; O’Reilly and Chatman, 1996). In other words, individualism should promote greater creativity in groups when pressure to conform to that norm is high rather than low.

An important assumption underlying this very straightforward two-way interaction prediction is that people will invariably respond to conformity pressure by complying with the group’s expectations. However, even Asch’s (1956) classical experiments suggest that this assumption will not always hold because individuals sometimes respond to group pressure by remaining independent or reacting against the norm (Levine, 1999). Moreover, the very personality traits that cause people to resist group pressure, such as independence, are also those that contribute to creative performance (Gough, 1979) making the application of conformity pressure in a creative context potentially risky.

We argue that the relationship between conformity pressure and norm content may be contingent on the personality composition of the group in two ways. First, highly creative people tend to

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