A Study of Conformity as Active Behavior

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine the following main hypothesis: In a series of group discussions, if one expects to get some support for his opinion of the latter topic, he will conform to others on the former topic. The four hundred and seven college students were asked to answer the questionnaire about how they behave (conform or not) in conflict situations when their opinions are different from four other friends. The findings are as follows: (1) Students who expected others' support for his opinion on the latter topic conformed more to the others on the former topic. (2) If the students expected an increased number of supporters on the latter topic, they conformed more to others on the former topic. (3) In the case where the latter topic is more important than the former topic, students conformed more to the others on the former topic.

Key words: active conformity, feedforward, supporter, group discussion, conflict situation.

Conformity is a theme which has been studied by not a few researchers since Asch (1951), and many of them have set up the following situations which induce conformity: (1) there exists a majority and a minority whose behavioral norms are different from each other, i.e. the power relations between the two are unequal. (2) the majority reveal their behavioral norm, and hence the minority perceive the pressure of the majority. (3) the minority change their behavior going alone with the majority's norms. But, we have not found so many studies which focus on the individual's intentions when he conforms or not under these situations.

A review of the literature on the subject has revealed the following studies. Harvey & Consalvi (1960), in an experiment which took place in the training center for juvenile delinquents, observed that the boys whose sociometric status was second, were most likely to conform boys in order to gain more popularity and to gain leadership status. Yoshitake, et al. (1990), in an experiment using the university students as the subjects, showed that the subjects were likely to conform to the opinion which the majority had been advocated. Nakamura (1969) proposed that there should be a distinction between "self-loving conformity" and "altruistic conformity" according to intentions of the conformers. The former is the conformity which is intended to protect one's own position or improving it. The latter is conformity which occurs as a result of considering the position of others. Moreover, we can find the conformity which is the means of gaining the others' favours (Walker & Heyns, 1962).

However, many researchers, basically, think
of conformity as the passive process of interpersonal influence. In addition to such conformity, we name the conformity which is positively intended and performed "active conformity".

Now, generally speaking, the relationship between an individual and a group lasts for a certain term. In that term, the group needs to solve a number of problems and the individual must behave in a suitable manner for solving the group problems. This suitable behavior must be exhibited over a long period of time.

The process in which one decides his behavior based on his "insight" into the future is called "Feedforward". Active conformity can be examined from the perspective of Feedforward (Kano, 1991). That is, when one in a group foresees that his opinion may be viewed negatively among a group in the future, it is likely he will back down on his opinion on the present subject, and make an attempt to conform positively to the others' opinion. Yoshitake (1991) suggests in an experiment using university students as subjects, a subject who wants to carry his opinion about the latter topic has the disposition to yield to the group opinion on the former topic. With respect to this phenomenon, we have generated the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1** When one can expect supporters of his opinion on the latter topic, his conformity on the former topic may increase, compare with the time when he cannot expect any supporter.

**Hypothesis 2** If the supporters of his opinion on the latter topic increase, his conformity on the former topic may increase as well.

Now then, the former topic and the latter topic do not necessarily have equal importance to the person concerned. The number of supporters on the important topic is made much more of as Feed Forward information. Therefore, the influence of the number of supporters about the latter topic upon his conformity on the former topic depends on the importance of the latter topic. Even when one can expect some supporters on the latter topic and the possibility of his opinion being adopted increases, if he thinks that the former topic is more important, he would not withdraw his opinion about the former one. Hereupon, we hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 3** When the importance of the latter topic is higher than that of the former topic, one's conformity on the former topic rises in proportion to the number of supporters on the latter topic. Whereas, when the importance of the latter topic is lower than that of the former topic, even when one can expect many to support his opinion on the latter topic, his conformity on the former topic will not rise in proportion to the number of supporters on the latter topic.

**Method**

A questionnaire was distributed to university students who were asked to fill out it.

**The content of the questionnaire** Hypothetical situation in which five students discuss and devise plans for activities with which the students are familiar, i.e. "travel," "part-time job," "party," and "term paper," were administered. There were two topics to be settled in each subject in their discussion. For example, the topics under "travel" were "the destination" and "the itinerary".

The importance of the topics: The two topics of each subject, we named M-topic (Main-topic) for the topic which many students judged more important than the other in the pre-interview, and S-topic (Sub-topic) for the one of lesser importance. M-topic and S-topic in each subject are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>M-topic</th>
<th>S-topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>travel</td>
<td>destination</td>
<td>itinerary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>part-time job</td>
<td>content of job</td>
<td>working days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>party</td>
<td>place</td>
<td>date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>term paper</td>
<td>theme</td>
<td>method</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MS-condition and SM-condition: We name MS-condition for the condition that the students should discuss the M-topic first and the S-topic next, and name SM-condition for the one that they should discuss in the reverse order. Two kinds of
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questionnaires, a questionnaire for the MS-condition and one for the SM-condition were prepared. The example of MS- and SM-condition in the topic of travel are cited below.

“The questionnaire for the MS-condition” (travel)

You are making travel plan with four friends. There are two place proposed, “A” and “B” for the destination, and two proposals, “X” and “Y” for the itinerary. You would like choose “B” for destination and “Y” for the itinerary, but the others do not seem to like the same idea.

In regard to the destination, you intensely claim the place “B”, but the others say that “A” is better.

In this situation, you...

a. would point out more of the good point of the place “B”, and claim “B” all the same.

b. would yield and give consent to idea “A” for the destination and propose to move on to the topic of itinerary.

“The questionnaire for the SM-condition” (travel)

You are making travel plan with four friends. There are two proposals, “X” and “Y” for the itinerary and two places proposed, “A” and “B” for the destination. You would like to choose “Y” for the itinerary and “B” for the destination, but the others do not necessarily seem to like the same idea.

In regard to the itinerary, you intensely claim plan “Y” but the others say that “X” is better.

In this situation, you...

a. would assert that plan “Y” is easier to adjust to, and so claim “Y” all the same.

b. would yield and give consent to plan “X” and propose to move on to the topic of destination.

Manipulation of the number of supporters in the latter topic

After the question written above, the following questions were made.

“The questionnaire for MS-condition” (travel)

In such a situation, suppose there is (are) one (two, three, or four) who say (s) that he (they) can agree with your proposal for the itinerary, if you settle for place “A” for the destination. Then, you...

a. would point out more of the good points of place “B” and claim “B” all the same.

b. would yield and give consent to idea “A” for the destination and propose to move on to the topic of itinerary.

“The questionnaire for SM-condition” (travel)

In such a situation, suppose there is (are) one (two, three, or four) who say (s) that he (they) can agree with your proposal of the destination, if you settle for plan “X” for the intinerary. Then, you...

a. would point out more of the good points of plan “Y”, and claim “Y” all the same.

b. would yield and give consent to idea “X” for the itinerary and propose to move on to the topic of destination.

Subjects

We distributed the questionnaire of MS-condition to two hundred and sixteen Saga University students (92 males, 123 females, 1 unidentified), and that of SM-condition to one hundred and ninety one Kyusyu University students (100 males, 90 females, 1 unidentified).

Results

The supporters of the latter topic and one’s conformity on the former topic.

Fig. 1 - Fig. 4 show the conformity rates of all the subjects (the subjects under MS-condition + ones under SM-condition) on the former topic. Also, Table 2 shows the statistical significance, by the McNemar method, in the conformity rates on the former topic between the number of supporters of the latter topic.

According to these figures, in all subjects, the conformity rate to the former topic is lower when no supporters are expected on the latter topic, compared with that of the time when any supporters can be expected. In Table 2, we can find the significant differences between each number of supporters “none”, “one”, “two”, “three”, and “four”, in each subject. Thereupon, we conclude
that when one expects any supporters on the latter topic, his conformity on the former topic increases.

The number of supporters on the latter topic and the conformity on the former topic.

Fig. 1, Fig. 3, and Fig. 4 show that the greater the number of supporters on the latter topic increases, the more the conformity rate on the former topic increases along with it. Moreover, the amounts of their increase are about equal in the three subjects (travel, party, and term paper). In Table 2, the significant differences in their increase can be observed in the three subjects except in that between “two” and “three” of the party subject.

In the case of the part-time job subject (Fig. 2), the conformity rate of “one” is already high enough, and hence it can be said that it almost reaches its peak from the first stage. Therefore,
it could well be that even if the number of the supporters increases thereafter in the latter topic, the increase of the conformity rate which goes along with it cannot be observed.

The imprtance of the latter topic and conformity on the former topic.

In Fig. 5 to Fig. 8, the conformity rates of the MS-condition and SM-condition on the former topic are compared with the number of supporters
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Table 3
Test of significance of conformity rates on the former topic under the MS-and SM-condition (McNemar test)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the number of supporters</th>
<th>travel</th>
<th>part-time job</th>
<th>party</th>
<th>term paper</th>
<th>travel</th>
<th>part-time job</th>
<th>party</th>
<th>term paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 – 1</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− 2</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− 3</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− 4</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 – 2</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
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<tr>
<td>− 3</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
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<tr>
<td>− 4</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 – 3</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− 4</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – 4</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
<td>⋆udios</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⋆ ⋆ (p<.01), ⋆ (p<.05), ⋆ (p<.10)

on the latter topic. Also, Table 3 shows the result of the significant test of the conformity rates on the former topic between the each number of supporters on the latter topic.

In all four subjects, the conformity rate of “no” supporters under the SM-condition is higher than that under the MS-condition, and there were significant differences between the two conditions in the subjects of travel, party, and term paper. When no supporters can be expected on the latter topic, as the importance of the former topic alone becomes the point issue, under the MS-condition, one tries to assert his opinion and the conformity rate remains low on the former topic.

In regard to the relation between the conformity rates on the former topic and the number of supporters on the latter topic, under MS-condition in all four subjects, the more the number of supporters increases, the more the conformity rate gradually rises. Whereas, the conformity rate under SM-condition is high enough from the stage of a small number of supporters.

While, when we compare the conformity rate between the MS-condition and SM-condition, in the case of the same number of supporter(s), the fewer the number of supporters, the more noticeable the difference between the two conditions becomes, except in the subject of part-time job. When the number of the supporters increases, the difference of the conformity rate caused by the importance of the topic tends to decrease. To sum up, when the more important topic comes first (MS-condition), the effect of the number of supporters about the latter topic upon one’s conformity about the former topic increases, and when that of less importance comes first (SM-condition), the conformity rate on the former topic remains high regardless of the number of supporters of the latter topic.

Discussion

Hypothesis 1, that when one expects any supporters of his opinion on the latter topic, he is likely to conform to the others’ opinion on the former topic, is verified. The result showsthat when there is no more than one supporter, the conformity rate becomes higher, compared with when there is no supporter. If one finds even one supporter in the latter topic, the possibility that his opinion on the latter topic will be adopted will become higher. Hence, he would not want to have his opinions on both topics be expunged because he contends his opinion on the former topic to the bitter end, but that he would rather be content if his opinion on the latter topic is adopted.

Further, on the subjects of “travel”, “party”, and “term paper”, the more the number of supporters increases, the higher the conformity rate is gradually raised along with it. From this result,
it can be said that Hypothesis 2 was verified. In reference to the relation between conformity and both the MS- and SM-condition, in the case when the number of supporters on the latter topic is equal under the two conditions, the less the number of supporters on the latter topic is, the more obvious the difference between the conformity rate; while, the more the number of supporters increases, the less obvious the difference between each conformity rate, except in the subject of "part-time job". To sum up, the difference of number of supporters on the latter topic reflects the conformity behavior in the case when the more important topic precedes (MS-condition); and under the condition that a less important topic precedes (SM-condition), the conformity on the former topic remains high irrespective of the number of supporters. This doesn't maintain Hypothesis 3. On the contrary, it is opposite to the hypothesis.

The expected result was that under SM-condition the number of supporters of the latter topic has more significant meaning to Feed Forward and so the effect caused by the number of supporters would reflect more obviously the conformity behavior with respect to the former topic; however, the actual result was that the conformity behavior always remains at a high level. How can we interpret this?

In the questionnaire, the subjects supposed the situation in which only his opinion was opposite to the other four people's, and hence his opinion could hardly be adopted among them on both topics.

However, on the latter topic, there was (were) any number of supporter (s) (one to four, but the case could happen that no supporters appeared), and his opinion had the possibility of being adopted.

In this situation, under the condition that the importance of the topic presently discussed is lower than that of the latter topic (SM-condition), the subject thought that it was more agreeable for him to conform for the sake of himself and the group as a whole and to make the unanimous decision. Thus, the conformity rate kept a comparatively high level even when the number of supporters on the latter topic was small.

Whereas, under MS-condition, even when only his opinion was different from the others', since the importance of the topic presently discussed was high, he did not want to subordinate his opinion. Upon this, it can be considered that since he intended to conform in view of the expedient development in the number of supporters on the latter topic, the difference of the number of supporters on the latter topic reflected his conformity on the former topic.

As we have seen, neither is one's conformity nor non-conformity the simple phenomenon which is performed through Feed Forward by the number of supporters only, nor is it the kind that is performed under the condition of only importance of the topic. It can be supposed that after one deliberates on the likelihood that his opinion will be adopted among the others, he dexterously makes a choice either that he concedes when he can, or he waits for the right time when situation changes into an expedient one for himself, if he finds it difficult to concede right away.

Consequently, it can be observed that the number of supporters has larger efficacy with respect to one's conformity on the topic on which his opinion bids fair to be adopted. With regard to the topic on which his opinion is not likely to be adopted, the number of supporters is less efficacious.

The result seen under the SM-condition is that even if the topic was an important one to the individual, when the possibility that his opinion would be adopted was scanty, he was likely to conform irrespective of the number of supporters on the latter topic. This result indicates his tendency to choose to make a unanimous opinion rather than to persist hopelessly. When subjects find any supporters on the latter topic, they recognize that the latter topic has high relevance to the others. This means that the latter topic under SM-condition is important not only to themselves but to the others. Therefore, under the SM-condition, subjects show high conformity on the former topic even if only one supporter is expected
on the latter topic, so the number of supporters on the latter topic is not so effective to conformity on the former topic.

When we classified importance of topics in each subject, we named M-topic for the topic which many students thought more important, which could be known by the previous interview with the students, and S-topic for the other which was otherwise. However, the importance of the topic, basically speaking, should be decided by each person’s cognition, and hence we are in need of further examination on this point.

Summary

The purpose of this study is to examine the hypothesis that under the situation of making decision among a group, when one expects any supporter (s) to his opinion on the latter topic, the tendency that he conforms to others’ opinion on the former topic (which we call active conformity) can be observed.

The subjects were four hundred and seven university students. They were made to suppose the situation that each one of them solely had a different opinion from the rest of the members in a group of five. Questionnaires were administered to examine how each individual responds to the pressure by the others to conform.

The following results were yielded,

1. When any supporters to his opinion on the latter topic can be expected, one comes to have the tendency to concede his opinion on the former topic and to conform to others.

2. The more the number of the expected supporters to his opinion on the latter topic increases, the higher his conformity to the others’ opinion rises.

3. When the former topic is more important than the latter topic for the subject, his conformity on the former topic is affected by the number of supporters on the latter topic, while when the latter topic is more important, the conformity rate on the former topic maintains a high level irrespective of the number of supporters on the latter topic.

Reference


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