The Effect of Moral Competence on online Conformity Behavior

Aida Mofakhami

Iran,2019¹

Abstract:

Moral Competency defined as the ability to solve conflicts on the basis of shared moral principles through cooperation rather than through violence, deceit and power, has received little attention among different psychological approaches; despite its importance in predicting many of our social interactions. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of moral competency on online conformity behavior. 217 students from three universities of Teheran were selected for a quasi-experimental study. First participants’ moral competence was measured with the online form of moral competence test (MCT) by Lind (2019), Then the subjects participated in an online version of Asch type experiment in which conformity were induced. The results showed a clear conformity behavior in use of the internet. An average of 32.09% of participants conformed to each critical question. Comparing to Asch’s line judgment task, the mean conformity in this experiment was lower but still significant enough to show the conformity behavior (36.8% compared with 7.4%) which might stem from the online situation in which some other variables like deindividuation effect might influence this difference. The results also indicated that there was a weak but negative correlation between moral competency and conformity behavior. The results confirms our hypothesis weakly; subjects with higher moral competence tended to show lower conformity. If the result could be replicated it would imply that conformity is not a general and stable trait of people as Asch assumed, but depends on people’s development of moral competence which can be fostered through education.

Keywords: Moral Competency, Social Conformity, online Conformity, MCT

¹ This paper is presented at the 13th International Symposium on "Moral competence: Its nature, relevance and teachability” in Konstanz, July 25-26, 2019
Introduction:

Conformity as a psychological term is defined as an influence resulting from one’s willingness to accept others’ opinions about reality (Asch, 1955). Although it is human nature to follow others, conformity can lead to very dangerous behaviors. As Zimbardo (2007) has noted, conformity is a strong group psychological mechanism that can make people behave inhumanly. On the other hand, conformity as a social mechanism can also serve as a prosocial behavior and help group dynamics to communicate in more effective ways (Bond & Smith, 1996). The examples of this behavior occur in almost all our everyday life, when we are standing while our national anthem is played as the others do so, or when we like others posts on Instagram just because a vast majority have been liked beforehand, generally, when we confirm ideas just because the majority has accepted it, not because we truly believe in them, we are simply conforming. As the internet has penetrated every facet of our lives and has become inseparable from day to day conduct, it is necessary to take into account this emerging context when studying such variables in social interactions of individuals. In this regard current study was designed in an online form in order to investigate online conformity behavior.

Solomon Asch (1958) was one of the first psychologists who studied conformity. He used a lab experiment in which a group of eight persons participated at a “line judgment” task which in fact only one of them was the real participant and the other seven were the confederates who act as participant but the real participant did not know this. During the experiment, each student viewed a card showing a target line on one side and three comparison lines on the other side. Each person in the room had to choose aloud which comparison line (A, B or C) was similar to the target line. The answer was always obvious. The real participant was always the last person who should give his answer and the confederate had prepared in advance to give an obvious wrong answer in most trials (critical trials). On average, about one third of the participants who were placed in this situation, confirm with the clearly wrong majority in critical trials. Asch’s experiment (1955, 1956, 1958) also had a control condition where there were no confederates, only a “real participant”. In Asch’s line judgment task (Asch, 1955, 1956, 1958) the test subjects complied on average with the majority’s wrong judgment in 36% of their selections (Rosendar, 2012). Although conformity as a face-to-face behavior has been widely studied by many previous researchers (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955; Bond & Smith, 1996; Baumeister, 1982; Janes & Olson, 2000, Goeree & Yarive, 2015), there is still few studies which investigates conformity behavior in non face-to-face situations.

In regards to recent studies on conformity in CMC (computer mediated communication) conditions, Michael Rosander (2012) studied Conformity on the Internet and The role of task difficulty and gender differences which as one of the well-designed studies at its time by which
the present study is also inspired. Rosander used a web-based survey as the social context for the study, the results of this study showed 52.6% conformed at least once, with an average 13.0% of participants conforming on each critical question. The conformity increased with higher task difficulty, and he found no difference between men and women regarding their conformity behavior. The study discusses some reasons based on the theories and previous studies for this form of conformity behavior like turning to the group for guidance, avoiding social isolation and protecting one’s self-esteem (Rosander, 2012). However, Rosander (2012) emphasized more on factors that could be considered stemming from the environment to influence conformity such as social isolation. The importance of more internal variables which seems to differ through education have received little attention so far and may also play an essential role in conformity behavior. In other words, conformity may not be as static as Asch assumed.

In present study, Moral Competence as another variable would come to the play which we assume to have an impact on conformity behavior based on theory and its definition. This notion was first raised by Georg Lind (1978), the German psychologist and philosopher. he defines moral competency “as the ability to solve conflicts and problems on the basis of shared moral principles through thinking and discussion rather than through violence, deceit and power”, specifically it is the ability to rate arguments of others in regard to their moral quality rather their opinion-agreement. this study considers moral competency as a key variable which plays an essential role in the extent of individual’s conformity behavior. as the definition of moral competency suggests, the more people were able to judge argument ts based on their own principles (and not based on the other opinions), the less they may conform to the wrong majority options. In other words, people with higher moral competency are less likely to express conformity behavior in a social pressure condition.

Conformity may also play a role when people behave immorally when others ask them to do so, even when their own moral principles would not allow this. Stanley Milgram (1963) has shown that two thirds of his participant gave other subjects electroshocks in an alleged learning experiment, even though they thought this was wrong. as they said afterwards. Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) repeated Milgram's experiment, showing that participants with high moral competence refused to obey this immoral instruction. They seem to be immune against conforming to immoral orders. Perhaps this influence of moral competence on conforming behavior can also be demonstrated with the current experiment.

The main Hypotheses of this study are:

1. Conformity behavior would occur in an online context

2. People with High moral competence are less probable to submitting to conformity pressure

Research Method:

Participants:
Participants were 217 students consisting 140 women and 77 men (71.7% female and 
28.3% male) ranging from 18 to 36 year old who participated voluntarily in return for cash credit.

The population of this study comprised undergraduate students of three universities in 
Teheran in winter semester of 2017-2018.

The subjects were divided into two distinctive groups (one control group and one conformity 
group). 10 participants were eliminated from the sample because they were under 18 or did not 
complete the whole experiment.

Materials:

1- MCT (Online form)

The Moral Competence Test (MCT) contains 24 arguments pro and contra the protagonists’ 
decision in two dilemma situations which are to be rated with regard to their acceptability. They 
are first asked to express their opinion about the actor’s decision (the first six arguments are in 
support of the actor decision and the other 6 arguments contradicts his decision) and then, 
regardless of their opinion, they were asked to the arguments on a 9-scale Likert scale ranging 
from -4 (strongly disagree) to +4 (strongly agree). Each argument was designed to represents one 
of Kohlberg’s six type of moral orientation (Lind, 2019). Depending on the pattern of their 
answers, the respondents’ moral competence is scored with the help can get a score ranging from 
0 (no moral competence at all) to 100 (very high moral competence). MCT is suited for people 
over 10 years.

The implicit task of the MCT is to rate the arguments with regard to their moral quality instead of 
the opinion agreement. That is, this task was not made explicit to the subjects.

In this study, the Persian translation form of MCT by Saeidi (2011) was used by an online form 
available on a web site named www.ravanhami.ir.
A woman had cancer and she had no hope of being saved. She was in terrible pain and was so weak that a large dose of a painkiller such as morphine would have caused her to die. During a brief period of improvement, she begged the doctor to give her enough morphine to kill her. She said she could no longer stand the pain and would be dead in a few weeks anyway. After some thinking, the doctor decided to give her an overdose of morphine.

14. Do you agree or disagree with the doctor’s action?

How acceptable do you find the following arguments in favor of the doctor’s actions?

Suppose someone said he acted in a right way . . .

15. because the doctor had to act according to his conscience and what he believed was right. The woman's pain made it right for the doctor to ignore his moral obligation to preserve life.

16. because the doctor was the only one who could do what the woman asked; respect for her wish made him act the way he did.

17. because the doctor only did what the woman talked him into doing. He does not need to worry about negative consequences.

18. because the woman would have died anyway and it didn't take much effort for him to give her an overdose of a painkiller.

19. because the doctor didn’t really break the law. Nobody could have saved the woman and he only wanted to shorten her suffering.

20. because most of his fellow doctors would most probably have done the same thing in a similar situation.

Figure 1 MCT by Lind (2019). Doctor-dilemma with six supporting arguments as an example.

1- Conformity situation (Web-based survey)

In order to induce conformity behavior, the author designed an experimental situation which was methodologically a replication of Michael Rosander (2012) but customize the question in a way that matches to the participant’s cultural background. In this situation, the participants were randomly assigned to one of the two groups, in which they were asked to answer 40 questions about general knowledge in four areas including, chemistry, history, literature and geography. Participants in experimental group were presented with a faked diagram showing a high majority of previous participants had chosen an obviously wrong option while the control group receive no diagrams for the same questions (figure 2). Conforming answer were given the value of one and nonconforming answer were given the value of zero.
**Question 12.** What is the chemical symbol for calcium?

![Bar chart showing the percentage of responses for the chemical symbol of calcium.](chart.png)

**Figure 2** an example question shown to experimental group (critical question)

- a. k
- b. C (conformity answer)
- c. Ca (correct answer)
- d. Cl

**Procedure and design:**

The study was a quasi-experimental with an experimental condition. In fact, faked diagrams played the role of confederates in Aschs’ classic experiment because they showed a majority of participants have selected the obviously wrong answer.

In about 40% of the cases, a correct description of answer’s distribution was displayed on diagrams called “neutral question” and the distribution in the other 60% of the diagrams was fabricated, showing the majority choosing an incorrect answer called “critical questions” (Rosendar, 2012). The reason for having 40% of neutral question was to avoid raising too much suspicion in the participants since a high level of suspicion seem to have negative influence on conformity behavior and result in methodological problems (Stang, 1976).

The procedure of this study included 3 steps:
Step 1: all participants completed a one page of demographic questions (age, gender and education level).

Step 2: they answered the online form of MCT questions before starting the experimental phase.

Step 3: they were assigned to one of the two groups and were asked to answer 40 items of the general knowledge test. The order of questions was identical in both control and experimental groups.

In order to prevent the web search effect for the experimental part of the research, the participants had only 30 seconds for each question to answer and they could only go forward during the experiment. They were not allowed to use “back” option during the test.

**Results:**

For statistical analysis of the two main hypothesis of this study PSPP were used. No significant differences were found regarding the age, gender differences and educational levels between conformity and control groups.

1. **Conformity behavior would occur in an online context**

   Regarding this assumption, we expected a significant difference in conformity level between control and experimental groups. For the twenty-two critical questions the mean number of answers in accordance with the manipulation in the conformity group ($M=7.482$, $SD=4.421$, $n=112$) was higher than control group ($M=3.284$, $SD=1.766$, $n=96$). As can be seen the difference between mean scores of the experimental and control group represent that in this experimental situation conformity does happen; that is, even people who are alone in use of the internet they are still under the pressure of majority for conformity (figure 3).

   In second analysis, conformity was measured as difference, for each of 22 critical questions between the number of answers following the incorrect and fabricated majority answers showed to the conformity group and the number of participants giving the same answers in the control group. $\chi^2$ was used to determine if the frequency of answers in accordance with the manipulation in the conformity group differed from the frequency of the same answers in the control group.

   According to the results of $\chi^2$ test there was a significant difference between experimental and control group for all the questions, except three of them (q15, q23 and q30). So that the experimental group were conformed much higher than the control group.

   Both analysis (mean scores and $\chi^2$ test) support hypothesis 1 that in, the conformity group conformed to what they were led to believe was the answer of the majority of the participants to a greater degree than the chance of participants in the control group giving the same incorrect answer. The results shown that conformity behavior occurs in an Internet-based context. Although it is not as much as what Asch had observed, but it is yet remarkable.
2. People with High moral competence are less probable to submitting to conformity pressure

According to this hypothesis, we expected a significant lower level of conformity behavior among high c-score group.

the mean score for moral competence in experimental group (M=20.552, SD=16.379, n=112) was almost compatible with control group (M=20.821, SD=15.71, n=96). The results reveal that, participants with moral competence above 20 (C>20) show less conformity than participants with a moral competence below (C<21). moral competency and conformity behavior were negatively correlated. (r =-0.183) meaning that the increase in c-score which show high moral competency are compatible with decrease in conformity behavior in participants (figure 4). As be seen in the graph, the correlation is rather small. This occur maybe because the pressure for conformity was not high enough to show a wider difference in conformity level for different C-scores, but as can be seen in figure.2, these two variables are still negatively correlated.
Discussion:

The present study aimed to see if and how people conform in an online context and how moral competency would affect the conformity behavior of people in this context. The results show that people do conform in this situation; that is, even people who are online by themselves are still under the pressure of majority for showing conformity behavior. Which is consistent with earlier research (Rosander, 2012; Jim&Park, 2011; Cinnierella & Greene, 2007). Comparing to Asch’s line judgment task, the mean conformity in this experiment is lower (36.8% compared with 7.4%) which is because of many differences in experimental design especially the online form of experiment which is far different from a face to face situation. The effects of deindividuation may be one of the main reasons for this decrease as Rosander (2012) also reported. But the shown decline in mean conformity level is consistent with other previous studies of online conformity (Rosander, 2012; Jim&Park, 2011; Cinnierella & Greene, 2007). Comparing to Rosander (2012), the mean conformity of this study is also lower (7.4% compared with 13.0%) which may relate to the differences in culture, experimental design and the sample size. As there are few literatures in this area, further replications of this study are needed in a larger sample and with some minor changes in the experimental design in a manner that increases the amount of social pressure. To give some suggestions for this issue,
- the question which were chosen for the experimental group could be selected more accurately in terms of difficulty so that the pressure for conformity increases, a standard pilot study may be needed prior to the experiment.

-Any measure that decreases the deindividuation effect would boost the conformity effect, for example if participants were told that their answers would be displayed publicly on the website after the test with their own Email address being visible, it may to some extent influence their behavior.

In accordance with Hypothesis 2, the results show that moral competency can play a role in conformity behavior. In other words, conformity behavior may not be as fixed as Asch thought. Moral competency seems to be a mediator variable which affects the level of conformity. As the present research was a preliminary study in this area, more accurate experimental design with a larger sample size are needed to address this subject in a more reliable manner.

On the other hand, Solomon Asch has shown in his conformity experiments that people more often than not value others’ opinions more than their own, even when the answers provided by the majority is obviously wrong. Such explanations for this behavior could be things such as turning to the group for guidance and avoiding social isolation have been discussed in earlier research, but all of these factors can be considered environmental, that is changing social environment seems to be the only way that may affect the level of conformity behavior. However, in this study an “internal variable” has been found which seem to be stronger than other previous ones. Moral competency is an ability which facilitates individuals to act based on their own opinions regardless of how intense the pressure is on the outside. As we could see in the results, people with higher C-scores were less likely to accept the others’ answers even when the pressure to conform was high by the fabricated majority answers. In contrast, people with low or medium C-scores were conforming to almost every critical question. In addition, there were few individuals in Asch’s experiments who never conformed during the tests’ trials, which may be another hint for researchers to focus more on internal reasons rather than environmental. Perhaps there is a need for a new model of behavior, an internal model which includes such characteristics as moral competency interacting with conformity behavior. One of the main goals of this study was to find a new way of understanding the influence of social media in people’s behavior which has become a recent major dilemma in Iranian society. As Lind (2016) states, moral competency is an educational concept which can be learned through development. According to his definition, conformity behavior seems to change by learning moral competency. This can be one of the main new policies of the educational systems all around the world especially such developing countries like Iran.
References:


Cinnirella, M., & Green, B. (2007). Does ‘cyber-conformity’ vary cross-culturally?


