Conformity, Persuasibility and Counternormative Persuasion*

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The relationship between conformity to social norms, persuasibility and counternormative persuasion was studied among residents of a home for aged. In general the residents were highly persuasible and some were clearly more persuasible than others. However, no relationship was found between the tendency to agree with the interviewers and conformity to the norms of the home. Furthermore, highly conforming residents were found to be most resistant to counternormative persuasive appeals. Conforming individuals evaluated the home highly and tended to regard it as a positive reference group while simultaneously indicating a lack of interest in people and events outside the home. It was concluded that conformity was less dependent upon a general compliance tendency than upon commitment to normative standards of the home.

This study was designed to determine whether individuals who conformed to the norms of an ongoing group also acquiesced under conditions of experimental persuasion. Parson's definition of conformity, "behavior enacted in accordance with the normative standards which have come to be set up as the common culture," 1 was used. Elderly people who had resided in a home for aged for a year or more were studied. Their conformity to the normative standards of the home was assessed and related to two other forms of compliant behavior, persuasibility and counternormative persuasion, both of which concern the tendency of the individual to be persuaded or, at least, to express agreement with an opinion presented by an outside experimenter. The measures of experimental persuasion varied from those of little concern.

* This paper is based on a portion of a doctoral dissertation submitted to the faculty of political science of Columbia University. The authors are indebted to the members of the dissertation committee, Richard Christie (Chairman), Joseph Zubin and Herbert Hyman for their assistance and advice during all stages of this research. We wish to thank Frederic Zeman and other personnel of the Jewish Home and Hospital for the Aged for the cooperation and interest offered so generously by them. We are very much indebted to Henry J. Walton of the University of Edinburgh, who conducted the psychiatric examinations under a U. S. Public Health Service research fellowship. This research was supported by NIMH predoctoral fellowship #14,144 C1 and NIMH grants MH02775 and CD00029.

to any of the residents of the home for aged, to those which were salient to them by virtue of their status as residents. Conformity, persuasibility and counternormative persuasion were related to reference group selections, psychiatric diagnosis, and selected background factors.

The question of whether individuals who are compliant or conforming in one situation tend to be compliant in other, quite different, situations is an open one. Research in which different aspects of compliant behavior have been related in ad hoc groups has yielded inconsistent results. Back and Davis investigated the relations between conformity to social norms among nursing students at Duke University, and yielding to the incorrect perceptual judgments of others in a laboratory experiment. They found a moderate correlation of +.25 between the two conformity situations. They noted that previous experimenters have generally found stronger relationships between measures of conformity and attributed this to the fact that prior studies typically had more situational similarity in the measures employed. The study of Back and Davis is unique in that they dealt with conformity to the social norm of a naturally existing group, and with the problem of generalizing from laboratory studies of conformity to natural life situations.

Personal involvement with an issue relating to a particular group is directly dependent upon one's evaluation of that group. A great many laboratory studies of conformity have demonstrated a positive relationship between how attractive the individual finds the group and his tendency to conform, or to endorse the judgments of the other group members. The issue becomes more complex when the concept of reference group is introduced, since the question "conformity to what?" becomes germane. Newcomb found that those students


who considered Bennington a highly attractive college and used it as a positive reference group were likely to conform by accepting the prevailing "liberal" campus attitudes. However, he found that the students who could be called "independents" with reference to the Bennington norms were, in fact, usually conforming to a different set of norms, i.e. those of their own reference group. He concluded that reference groups typically serve as anchors for an individual's attitudes.

In the present study, conducted with aged people residing in a home, conformity to the norms of an ongoing group was measured. This was made possible by the fact that a naturally restricted environment was used in which the social norms were partly known as a result of previous research. The home for the aged was a self-contained community in which residents planned to spend the remaining years of their lives. Room, board, medical and nursing care, religious services and a wide variety of activities and voluntary jobs were provided on the premises. Residents were not required to leave the home for any reason and few ever did. Since the home encompasses so much of the lives of those who reside there, it may be classified as a "total institution."

A norm was defined as an expectation for behavior about which there was consensus among residents. Methods used to study norms were observation, content analysis of articles appearing in the home's newspaper, and interviews with staff members, old-time residents and newly admitted residents. Only those norms on which consensus increased after residents were in the home from one to two months were considered norms specific to the home. These norms were used in determining conformity to the "common culture" of the home.

In contrast, persuasibility was defined independently of the norms of the home. The concept of persuasibility was developed by Hovland, Janis and others, and refers to consistent individual differences in susceptibility to persuasion. They noted that almost irrespective of the issue involved, there seemed to be some individuals who were more susceptible than others to persuasive appeals. To eliminate the effect of a pre-existing attitude toward a particular issue, Lesser and Abelson constructed a topic-free measure of persuasibility, consisting of pairs of pictures, where the content of the com-
munication was novel and uninvolling. A modification of this instrument was used in the present research.

The notion of topic free persuasibility has proven useful in stimulating research but is limited to the extent that there is a difference in kind as well as in degree between persuasion to novel, ambiguous material and persuasion to meaningful material. That an individual’s personal involvement in an issue is critical in any consideration of attitude change has been emphasized in the theory of Sherif and Hovland. Because the norms of the home were at least partly known, it was possible to develop counternormative appeals about issues concerning the home’s way of life with which residents felt personally involved. In all, three measures of persuasibility were used which varied from topic free to highly salient to the residents.

METHOD

SUBJECTS. Ninety-six residents of a home for the aged served as subjects. The sample included every resident who was admitted between one and three years prior to the study except those who were in the infirmary, unable to speak English or totally deaf. Twenty seven men and sixty nine women were interviewed; their ages ranged from 64 to 92 years, the median age being 82 years. All were Jewish and of the white race. Sixty four per cent came to this country from Europe and the rest were native born. Their education varied from six residents who had no formal schooling to five who had graduated from college; the average person had an elementary school education. Although seven residents expired or were hospitalized during the course of the experiment, no one was lost because of refusal to be interviewed.

The home in which this research was conducted is a voluntary, non-proprietary institution located in the New York metropolitan area, which is largely supported by a Jewish philanthropic organization. It offers an unusually wide variety of services to the residents, and in addition, serves as a center for training workers in the care of the aged. The residents in the sample were housed in the central branch of the institution where a full time staff of physicians, nurses, paramedical and housekeeping personnel are employed.

PROCEDURE. Every resident in the sample was interviewed twice; an average of six months elapsed between the first and the second interview. The interviews were conducted by two women experimenters in their late 20’s, each of whom conducted half of the first and half of the second interviews. Approximately half of the interviews were tape recorded in order to assess the con- spective reliability of persuasibility measures.

At the same time, fifty residents in the sample were interviewed again by a psychiatrist who was not affiliated with the home and did not have access to the data reported below. Based upon a standard psychiatric interview, fifteen subjects were given a diagnosis of senile dementia, eighteen a diagnosis of functional psychiatric disorder (of these, five had a diagnosis of both senile dementia and functional disorder), and twenty two were found to be normal. All but one case of senile dementia were considered mild and all functional disorders were either neuroses or character disorders. Details of the clinical assessment are given elsewhere.

SCALES. Conformity. The conformity scale contained twenty questions about behavior relating to norms shared by residents of the home which are shown in Table 1. Items #1 to #10 were administered during the first interview; items #11 to #20 were administered during the second interview. There were an equal number of positively and negatively worded questions and an equal number of questions worded hypothetically and in terms of actual behavior. This balance was maintained for the halves of the scale, administered during each interview, as well as for the full scale. Responses were scored as conforming or nonconforming. The theoretical range of scores was from zero, for total nonconformity, to 20 for total conformity.

Counternormative appeals. The counternormative appeals consisted of standardized arguments against resident norms in which there was a discrepancy between the prevailing resident norm and the administrative position. Two such issues were found: one concerned tipping the help; despite the home’s policy against tipping, nearly every resident tipped and was convinced that this was necessary and proper. The other concerned sharing one’s room with another; due to a shortage of private rooms, nearly every resident had at least one roommate. Residents disliked the necessity of sharing a room and felt that, ideally, they should have rooms for themselves. The


11 The opinion scale of persuasibility contained open-ended items requiring the interviewer to interpret whether the subject agreed or disagreed with the item. A clerk listened to recordings of forty six first and second interviews (roughly half of the tapes) and independently scored the responses “agree” or “disagree”. There was 95 per cent agreement between the interviewer and the clerk, and two per cent disagreement (in three per cent of the cases, the clerk couldn't reach a decision). Persuasibility scores obtained by the two interviewers were compared and no differences were found on either the picture choice or the opinion scale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conformity I</th>
<th>Conformity II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Should you keep yourself from reporting a resident to the staff even if he was terribly annoying? 61.5*</td>
<td>11. Have you ever reported another resident to the staff? 27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Have you ever told a staff member about another staff member whom you didn’t like? 11.5</td>
<td>12. Would you keep yourself from talking to one staff member about another staff member that you didn’t like even if you had a good reason? 87.5*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Would you ever go out of the Home without asking permission or showing your pass? 9.4</td>
<td>13. Do you always ask permission and show your pass when you leave the Home? 83.3*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Do you always make your visitors leave when visiting hours are over? 80.2*</td>
<td>14. Would you ever encourage a visitor to stay after visiting hours if you were having a very good time? 17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Have you ever refused to eat what was offered and asked for special food? 47.9</td>
<td>15. Would you quietly do without food if you didn’t like what was being served? 71.9*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Have you ever told a resident about someone you didn’t like here? 27.1</td>
<td>16. Do you always keep quiet about residents that you don’t like even when everyone agrees that the person is impossible? 76.0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Have you ever told another resident about someone at your table who had terrible table manners? 70.9*</td>
<td>17. Have you ever made it clear that you were annoyed with someone at your table? 30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Do you always just pass it off when someone tries to argue with you? 70.9*</td>
<td>18. Would you argue with another resident if he was wrong? 39.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. If you couldn’t get on with your roommate, would you keep quiet about it and keep on trying? 50.0*</td>
<td>19. Have you ever asked to have your room changed? 30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Have you ever asked to have your table changed? 27.1</td>
<td>20. If you disliked all of the people that you ate with, would you stay at that table anyway? 55.2*</td>
</tr>
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Note: The asterisk shows the conforming response.
counternormative appeals consisted of extensive arguments against tipping
and for room-sharing. The presentation was standardized, including pauses
during which the residents were allowed to interject comments. However, no
matter what they said the interviewer proceeded with the text. For the two
counternormative appeals, the resident’s opinion was obtained both before
and after the presentation. In order to determine the individual’s opinion on
sharing a room with others in the home, the question, “When a resident first
enters the home, what do you think would be the ideal number of residents
sharing a room?” was asked at the beginning of the first interview. The
counternormative appeal on room sharing was read at the end of the same
interview, and immediately afterward the person was again asked, “What do
you think would be the ideal number of residents sharing a room?” For the
counternormative appeal concerning tipping the help, the questions, “Do you
think that residents should tip the help? Do you think that residents should
give presents to the help?”, were asked at the beginning of the first interview.
The appeal was administered during the second interview by another inter-
viewer, immediately after which the questions were asked again.\footnote{13}

_Persuasibility_. Two measures of persuasibility were used. The topic free
picture-choice scale consisted of 19 pairs of pictures. For each pair, residents
were asked to select their favorite. During one interview, the interviewer
pointed to a picture of the pair and said, “I like this one best, which one do
you prefer?” During the second interview, the other interviewer pointed to the
opposite picture as the preferred one. The persuasible resident was one who
agreed with the contradictory choices of both interviewers.\footnote{14}

The opinion scale concerned issues of national importance about which the
individual would be expected to have some pre-existing attitude. It contained
17 pairs of contradictory opinion statements which were administered ver-
bally. For example, during the first interview, one interviewer said, “I think
that hospital employees should be permitted to join unions the same as any
other workers in order to maintain their own self respect. What do you think?”
During the second interview, the other interviewer said, “I don’t think that
hospital employees should be permitted to join unions because their complete
loyalty should be toward the hospital. What do you think?” Residents who
agreed with both statements were considered persuasible. Issues such as
whether or not a communist should be permitted to speak in public and

\footnote{13}{The scale suffers from a pronounced ceiling effect since the main concern was with
movement in the direction of the appeal. Obviously, the residents who did not take the
normative position before the argument was presented could not obtain top scores.}

\footnote{14}{This scale was originally constructed by Lesser and Abelson for use with children.
In the present study the scale was modified for use with adults. Gerald Lesser supplied
the alternate picture pairs that modification necessitated.}
whether or not private clubs should be permitted to reject Negroes were among those included.

Use of the home as a reference group. In addition to the measures of compliance, the residents were asked to evaluate various aspects of life in the home, such as the food, the medical care, the activities and the other residents. Twenty such items comprised the evaluation scale. They were also asked whether they felt that the home had become an important place to them, whether it was as important to them now as their old homes with their families used to be, and whether they generally liked their new friends as well as those they had before. These three questions were used to determine if the home served as a reference group. Questions pertaining to the use of the world outside of the home as a positive reference group were more varied. Residents were asked whether they (1) left the home and how often, (2) maintained any social contacts outside of the home, (3) would consult the outside contact in instances of important decision making, (4) continued to belong to any outside organizations, and finally (5) continued to maintain an interest in politics and made use of the mass media.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the per cent of residents who said "yes" to each item on the conformity scale. Most residents were found to be highly conforming to the norms of the home. For example, 73% said that they had never reported a resident to the staff (item 11), 72% said that they would quietly do without food if they didn't like what was being served (item 15), and 60% said they would never argue with another resident even if he was wrong (item 18). Although for individual items the distribution of scores was J-shaped, total scores on the conformity scale approximated a normal distribution. Scores ranged from 4 to 20 with a mean of 14.4. An odd-even split-half reliability coefficient of +.72 was obtained.

Table 1 shows that there was no acquiescent response bias on the conformity scale. For items with similar content, residents said "no" in answer to a negatively worded question as often as they said "yes" to a positively worded one. When the item was worded in such a way that the conforming response was "yes", residents said "yes" 71 per cent of the time. When it was worded such that the conforming response was "no", residents said "no" 73 per cent of the time. Clearly there was no tendency to respond affirmatively irrespective of item content.

In contrast to conformity, there was a marked acquiescent response bias on both measures of persuasibility. Residents agreed with 70% of the opinion statements, endorsing both contradictory opinions nearly as often as they maintained an ideologically consistent point of view. Only four people dis-

agreed more frequently than they agreed. The same was true of the picture-choice scale where the residents agreed with 62% of the choices of the interviewers. On both scales, a score of zero would be obtained if a resident were logically consistent in his response to all items. Negative scores reflect a negativistic response set and positive scores reflect a persuasive response set. The mean scores for the opinion and picture-choice scales were 6.4 and 5.6 respectively, indicating that in general, the residents were highly persuasive.

Table 2 shows the intercorrelations between conformity, persuasibility and counterconformative persuasiveness. The highly significant correlation between the picture-choice and the opinion measure of persuasibility indicates that, irrespective of issue, some people agreed with the experimenters more readily than others. No significant relation was found when either the picture-choice scale or the opinion scale was related to counterconformative persuasiveness. This may be explained by the fact that neither persuasibility scale concerned issues relevant to life in the home. The general trait of persuasibility did not appear to affect responses to persuasive appeals regarding salient, normative issues. Similarly no relation was found between either measure of persuasibility and conformity to the norms of the home. Where normative issues were concerned, compliance depended upon something other than a general tendency to agree.

Most interesting is the negative relationship of —.27 found between counterconformative persuasion and conformity. This finding shows that those residents who usually conformed to rules of the home and complied with the expectation of others were not readily persuaded to change their views after being subjected to counterconformative persuasive appeals. In fact, conforming residents were particularly resistant to appeals to stop tipping or to accept the idea that sharing a room was beneficial. Thus, in this instance the conforming individuals proved to be least compliant. This finding can be most parsimoniously explained in terms of their commitment to the norms of the home. An individual who felt committed to the norms of his peer group would be
expected to: a) behave in accordance with those norms and, b) not be readily persuaded by an outsider to accept a counternormative position.

If the conforming individual is not merely yielding to social forces to which he feels no personal commitment, but rather is seeking personal support from others, we would expect him to regard the home as a positive reference group. Table 3 shows the relationship between conformity, evaluation and the use of the home or the outside as a positive reference group.

**TABLE 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation of Home</th>
<th>Home Selected as Reference Group</th>
<th>Outside Selected as Reference Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conformity</td>
<td>+.37**</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of Home</td>
<td>+.17</td>
<td>+.54**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Selected as Reference Group</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference Group</td>
<td>+.16</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<.01.
** p<.001.

It should be pointed out that the use of the home as a positive reference group in no way precluded the use of the greater society as an additional reference group. People who liked the home and thought that it had become a “real home” to them, could still maintain an interest in current events and continue to see old friends. Indeed, Table 3 shows a positive correlation of +.16 between use of the home as a reference group and maintenance of interest in the outside world. Unlike the other residents, however, conforming individuals did not do both. The substantial correlation of +.37 between conformity and positive evaluations of the home, and the significant negative correlation of -.24 between conformity and the use of the outside world as a reference group indicates that the conforming individual was clearly partial to the home. He evaluated specific aspects of the home more highly than the less conforming individual, and was more likely to feel that the home had become a real home to him. At the same time, he rejected or lost interest in people and events occurring outside of the home.

Conforming individuals were generally considered by the psychiatrist to be in better mental health than non-conforming ones. Functional disorders were significantly more frequent among those who scored below the median on conformity (X²=10.0 p<.01). This was not the case for persuasibility which was unrelated to psychiatric diagnosis either of functional disorder or of senile dementia. Women were found to be more conforming than men

(X²=4.16 p<.05), but not more persuasible. Neither conformity nor persuasibility were related to age, physical status or education, which might be due to the limited range of age or physical status among the residents of the home.

**DISCUSSION**

This research was addressed to the question of whether individuals who conform to the norms of an ongoing group also “conform” or acquiesce under conditions of experimental persuasion. For 96 residents of a home for the aged, the answer appears to be negative. Not only were conformity and persuasibility unrelated, but they related differently to relevant characteristics of the individuals. For instance, women were more conforming than men but no more persuasible. Similarly, those considered “normal” by a psychiatrist were highly conforming but not particularly persuasible.

The positive relationship between conformity and mental health is interesting in itself inasmuch as it is apparently contradictory to a considerable body of research.10 The problem is easily resolved, however, by examination of the norms to which conformity was expected in the present study. If, as has often been the case, conformity is defined in terms of yielding to an erroneous majority, then it might be expected to reflect a weakness of the ego as Hoffman has found. If, however, as is the case here, norms are part of the group’s traditions and are guides for behavior, conformity might be related to ego strength. The fact that there was a strong acquiescent or persuasible response bias on the persuasibility items but none on the conformity items once again demonstrates that individuals tend to say “yes” indiscriminately when the material is ambiguous or remote from their current interests. Unlike the persuasibility material, the conformity items required a report of actual (or intended) behavior. Personal commitment to the norms in question or the lack of ambiguity of the conformity items, or both, may have accounted for the lack of an agreeing response set on the conformity scale.

Since highly conforming individuals tended to use the home rather than the outside world as a positive reference group, it is likely that rewards from its members were more meaningful to them than the approval of an outside

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experimenters. Probably conforming individuals were better able to resist the experimenters in the counternormative situation partly because conformity to the prevailing norms of the group holds with it the promise of rewards for compliance and sanctions for deviance. In the home for aged, as in Bennington college, using the membership group as a reference group served as an anchor for the individual’s opinions. However, unlike Bennington, the home for aged is a total institution, in which, because of natural barriers to interaction with the outside, it is particularly difficult to maintain outside reference groups. Thus, the individual who does not use the home as a positive reference group would probably be deprived of any reference group. If the consequent lack of social support for the individual’s attitudes and opinions made him particularly vulnerable to persuasive appeals by authoritative outsiders, this might explain the unusually low relationship between conformity and persuasibility.

In conclusion, this study demonstrated that when elderly residents of a home were involved in an on-going group, their conformity to group norms could not be predicted from knowledge about a general tendency to agree. Moreover, the conforming resident did not blindly accept the dictates of authority. If he did, he should have been easily persuaded to endorse an appeal made by experimenters representing an authority outside the home to support a policy advocated by the administrative staff of the home. In the context of the home, the resident conformed to resident norms because the norms were part of a subgroup of which he was a member. When there was a discrepancy between prevailing resident norms and administrative policy, he did not disavow his commitment in order to go along with authority. It may be said, therefore, that he independently conformed to and endorsed a normative pattern to which he felt committed.