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ARTICLE

In defense of peer influence: The unheralded benefits of conformity

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Abstract
Peer influence is an instrument of change, with outcomes that are not preordained: The same processes that make influence a source of harm also make it a valuable interpersonal resource. Yet the benefits of peer influence are insufficiently appreciated. Knowing when and how much to conform to the wishes of others is an important skill that children must acquire to adjust to and thrive in a social world dominated by peers. Peer influence can be an adaptive strategy whose benefits outweigh the costs that sometimes arise in its application. To overlook the adaptive consequences of peer influence is to miss the main point of conformity, which is to foster harmony between individuals and secure their interpersonal, physical, and mental well-being.

KEYWORDS
friendship, peer influence, positive development

Peer influence has a bad reputation. Popular opinion equates peer influence with risky, inappropriate, and ill-considered behavior. Indeed, risky, inappropriate, and ill-considered behaviors often have origins in peer influence. We do not aim to minimize problems that arise from peer influence, but instead to draw attention to peer influence as a positive force in the lives of children and adolescents. Peer influence is an instrument of change, one whose outcome is not preordained. In the wrong hands, it can be a tool of oppression; in the wrong circumstances, it can be dangerous. Knowing when and how much to conform to the wishes of others is an important skill children must acquire to adjust to and thrive in a social world dominated by peers. In this article, we argue that peer influence is an adaptive strategy whose benefits outweigh the costs that sometimes accompany it. To overlook the adaptive consequences of peer influence is to miss the main point of conformity, which is to foster harmony between individuals and secure their interpersonal, physical, and mental well-being.

Our goal is to highlight the positive consequences of conformity. We begin by defining peer influence and summarizing what we know about developmental changes in tendencies to conform. Next, we argue that peer influence is integral to the success of individuals, relationships, and groups. We then provide examples of research, mostly from North American and European samples (which lean toward affluent and majority ethnic groups), that illustrate constructive behavior and positive outcomes tied to peer influence. Finally, we suggest that the benefits of conformity are not distributed equally, and discuss factors related to individual differences in susceptibility to positive peer influence.

WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE TALK ABOUT PEER INFLUENCE?

Peer influence occurs when individuals act or think in ways they might not otherwise act or think as a consequence of experiences with agemates (Laursen, 2018). The first step involves an actor, who is the agent of influence. Actors are individuals or groups of individuals who do or say something that affects the behaviors or attitudes of others. The second step involves a target, who conforms in response to the actions of the actor. Most peer influence does not result in out-of-character behavior. Instead, peer influence typically produces more extreme versions of the status quo. Our definition of influence does not emphasize the novelty of behaviors, but rather the sequence of events whereby actors elicit conformity from targets.

Peer influence need not be conscious or deliberate. Agents do not necessarily act with the intent to influence others; targets do not necessarily respond with calculated conformity. Agents often behave in ways designed to influence others and targets often purposefully

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conform, but intentionality is not a precondition for peer influence. For this reason, some have differentiated active peer influence (e.g., coercion, instruction) from passive peer influence (e.g., modeling/imitation, adherence to norms; Laninga-Wijnen & Veenstra, 2023).

Peer influence has long been operationalized in terms of conformity, with targets changing to become more similar to actors. But this widely adopted convention does not encompass all instances of peer influence. Conformity may involve maintaining similarity, which implies that targets who are otherwise inclined to change do not do so because of influence from the actor. Maintaining similarity is most likely to occur in longstanding relationships or groups, where further increases in similarity are impossible or impractical.

Developmental differences in peer influence have been hypothesized, with adolescence considered a period of vulnerability (see Laursen & Veenstra, 2021). Peer conformity peaks during midadolescence on perceptual tasks and experimental assessments of risk. Self-reports suggest that this is when resistance to peer pressure begins to increase. Finally, adolescents appear to be more neurologically primed than adults to respond to peer input and seek rewards from taking risks (Güroğlu & Veenstra, 2021). But there is much we do not know. Aside from comparisons of adolescence with late middle childhood and early young adulthood, researchers have not contrasted mechanisms and processes of influence across ages. Furthermore, documented age differences may not be what they seem. During midadolescence, changes in school and leisure settings increase context-specific conformity. During late adolescence and young adulthood, the diminished influence of friends masks the growing importance of other peers (e.g., romantic partners and work colleagues). Finally, age changes in peer conformity may differ across domains. Research has overwhelmingly focused on antisocial and risk-taking behavior, which may not generalize to peer influence over positive behaviors.

Gender differences are more the exception than the rule. Boys and girls present mean-level differences in many behaviors and attitudes. But differences in means do not translate into differences in influence. Although scholars may at some point identify robust gender differences in strategies or domains of influence, current evidence does not support such claims, with the possible exception that girls are more susceptible to influence from boys than vice versa (e.g., Moffitt et al., 2001) and that girls report more behavioral change in response to co-rumination and affective contagion than do boys (Rose & Smith, 2018).

THE PURPOSE OF PEER INFLUENCE

Individuals, relationships, and groups all benefit from conformity in response to peer influence. Next, we consider the adaptive consequences of conformity for each.

The adaptive consequences of conformity for individuals

Peer influence helps individuals establish and maintain relationships. Humans are social animals; the need for interpersonal connections is strong, so strong that belongingness is assumed to have evolutionary origins, propelling humans into close relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The absence of close relationships—social isolation—fosters loneliness, which triggers pain, distress, and maladaptive outcomes (Eisenberger et al., 2003). The risk of loneliness and the need to belong are particularly strong during adolescence, when the peer group is paramount. Conformity helps establish belongingness and sustains close relationships, signaling agreeableness and a preference for cooperation. Nonconformity invites disagreement and can lead to victimization (Kaufman et al., 2022).

The evidence is not strong, but peer influence likely promotes social skills and boosts perspective-taking. To conform, one must pay attention to and emulate others. Conformity enables the acquisition of shared conventions and guides the pragmatics of interactions. In one study, preschool children advised ostracized classmates to practice conformity as a strategic way to promote affiliation (Cordonier et al., 2018). In another, by the age of 9, children recognized that conforming to norms could help improve the social standing of atypical-looking or behaving classmates (Killen et al., 2002). Conformity may also refine perspective-taking abilities by forcing the individual to adopt the role of another to more fully understand and mimic their actions. Neurological evidence links conformity to perspective-taking (Stallen et al., 2013) and sensitivity to social information (McCormick et al., 2018).

Peer influence is key to addressing interpersonal challenges unique to adolescence. Conformity is an effective way to safely navigate conditions of uncertainty. The adolescent years are full of uncertainties, as youth traverse a social environment increasingly dominated by peers. Adolescents are also uncertain about who they are and what their place is in the world. Paradoxically, conformity provides a safe space for exploring one's identity, affording opportunities to try different roles and behaviors according to the norms prevalent in one's group or relationship.

The adaptive consequences of conformity for relationships

Peer influence facilitates the formation of close relationships. Observational studies of previously unacquainted young children suggest that future friends built common ground by modifying positions to identify shared interests in ways that signaled compatibility (Gottman, 1983). The more children agreed, the more

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positive affect they exchanged, and the richer the quality of their play and self-disclosure. Thus, prospective friends leverage conformity into closeness. A similar dynamic occurs during adolescence. Young adolescents recognize the importance of reciprocated conformity (Shulman et al., 1997). Friends are expected to go along to get along. Finally, pressures to conform drive youth into romantic relationships: In one study, young adolescent males reported that a primary motive for initiating a romantic relationship was to avoid being an isolate who lacked a partner for activities that required one (Smiler, 2008).

The influence-compatibility model (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021) holds that an important function of peer influence is to enhance similarity between friends. Similarity fosters stability in relationships through two avenues. First, conformity bolsters compatibility. Friends influence one another to promote similarity, both on attributes that served as the foundation for initial friendship selection and on secondary attributes that were not initial attractors. Across the transition into adolescence, friends increasingly recognize that success in relationships requires individual sacrifices, often in the form of conformity and subordination of self-interests (Shulman & Laursen, 2002). Conformity extends compatibility in new domains by expanding shared activities, creating rewarding experiences, and deepening interdependence. As commitment grows, friend alternatives dwindle, increasing the costs of dissolution.

Second, conformity reduces conflict. As similarity increases, areas of potential disagreement recede. Conflict carries the potential for negative affect, which can be toxic for voluntary relationships. As a consequence, friends are far less likely to engage in coercive, win/lose disagreements than nonfriends or family members (Adams & Laursen, 2001). Dissimilarities, and the conflicts accompanying them, raise questions about the distribution of costs and benefits. Perceived disequilibrium undermines commitment to and satisfaction with a relationship. Dissimilar friends become former friends: The odds of dissolution grow dramatically the more friends differ on school achievement and aggression (Hartl et al., 2015), and the more they differ on anxiety and depression (Guimond et al., 2019).

The adaptive consequences of conformity for groups

Peer influence is essential for forming and maintaining groups. Cliques are established based on common interests or activities. Because membership is restricted to those with attributes that define the group, outsiders conform to perceived group norms to gain admission. Once admitted, additional conformity may be required as new members are alerted to subtle expectations of similarity. Most groups demand conformity in the service of *identity signaling*, behaviors designed to convey information about membership in and defining characteristics of the group. Similarity in appearance, preferences, and attitudes helps separate ingroup members from outgroup members, promotes solidarity, and reinforces feelings of exclusivity. In turn, identification heightens conformity (Kiesner et al., 2002). Conformity is also an important source of cohesion. Individuals are more willing to invest time and resources into, and make sacrifices for, homogeneous groups than they are for groups whose members differ on salient attributes (Leach et al., 2008). Finally, conformity is essential if the group is to function smoothly. Lengthy deliberations are impractical in group settings. Compliance with group norms and decisions taken by leaders permits the group to efficiently identify priorities and adopt a course of action.

Peer influence fosters group stability. Similarity creates the appearance of consensus. Unity (perceived and real) prevents discord and thus protects group cohesion. Members with alternatives leave conflict-ridden groups for those that are more harmonious. Dissimilarity is the first step toward disunity because divisions are a source of disagreement. For this reason, individuals who threaten group harmony are marginalized and excluded (Pinto et al., 2010). Nonconformity signals marginal status and a lack of commitment to the group (*the black sheep effect*). Those who affiliate with the nonconforming risk the wrath of leaders who assume that affiliates share characteristics that threaten group cohesion. Abandoned by affiliates, the nonconforming must either leave the group or succumb to pressure to become more similar to the rest of the group. When nonconformists depart, group homogeneity increases, putting additional pressure on the remaining marginal members. The departure of nonconformists strengthens the identity of the group by removing unrepresentative members. Thus, conformity promotes the longevity of the group and helps ensure the individual's place within it.

THE BENEFITS OF PEER INFLUENCE

Emerging evidence underscores the adaptive benefits of conformity. Next, we highlight a few findings illustrating processes of influence. The benefits of conformity are not apportioned equally, so we close with a discussion of individual differences.

Conformity promotes positive adjustment

Most adolescents have the talent to catalyze positive change. They are willing to take risks for a good cause,

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helped by a growth in skills to handle complex tasks (Duell & Steinberg, 2019). Positive risk-taking, such as engaging in political protests, public performances, and injury-prone sports and hobbies, creates opportunities for adolescents to develop a sense of purpose and identity. Youth who take positive risks are influenced by peers who take similar risks (Youngblade et al., 2007).

Peer influence extends to other aspects of positive adjustment. As adolescents improve academically, affiliates follow suit (Gremmen et al., 2017). Peers serve as a positive influence when they endorse academic engagement. In one study, adolescents who did not feel out of place with displays of interest in learning became increasingly engaged in school (Wang et al., 2018). In another, friendships evolved into studying partnerships, which benefitted academic achievement (Palacios et al., 2019). In yet another study, socially isolated undergraduate students had lower grades and higher rates of academic attrition than undergraduates who were well-connected (Stadtfeld et al., 2019). Finally, research suggests that peers influence nonacademic aspects of positive adjustment, such as happiness (Van Workum et al., 2013), and constructive behaviors, such as defending (Veenstra & Huitsing, 2021) and seeking help (Shin, 2018).

Some peer influence takes the form of contagion, with behaviors spreading from those with relatively higher levels of a behavior to those with relatively lower levels. Peer influence also comes in the form of peer pressure—active attempts to change another's behavior. Coercive peer pressure may take the form of teasing, taunting, threats, or physical abuse. Peer pressure may also be rewarded through praise, encouragement, and tangible inducements. Both types of peer pressure can be used to good effect. Punishments may be administered to individuals who fail to conform to prosocial norms. Celebration may be accorded when harmful behaviors end. Adolescents also imitate behaviors modeled by affiliates, particularly if they are socially rewarded. In observational and experimental studies, imitation was more important than peer pressure in predicting which adolescents would adopt maladjusted behavior (Veenstra & Laninga-Wijnen, 2022). Risky behavior is most likely to be discouraged through a combination of imitation and peer pressure (Harakeh & De Boer, 2019). We do not know which processes are most effective in the adoption of positive behaviors.

For better (e.g., reciprocal encouragement) or worse (e.g., deviancy training, co-rumination), peer influence often occurs via bidirectional rather than unidirectional processes. Bidirectional influence may be responsible for the convergent effects found in research on social networks. Symptoms of depression increased among adolescents with depressed friends but decreased among adolescents with nondepressed friends (Kiuru et al., 2012). Similar findings have been reported for aggression and delinquency (Sijtsema & Lindenberg, 2018).

Not everyone profits equally: Individual differences in the benefits of peer influence

In another paper (Laursen & Faur, 2022), we highlight the important distinction between state-based conformity and trait-based conformity. States are transitory, specific to time and place. Exogeneous peer influence describes circumstances that elicit conformity from most individuals. In some circumstances, most individuals benefit from peer influence, with positive consequences from conformity a matter of being in the right place at the right time. Traits are enduring individual characteristics that are stable across time and place. Endogenous susceptibility to peer influence describes attributes—not uniformly distributed in a population—that increase or decrease the likelihood of conforming, and that increase or decrease the likelihood that conformity is beneficial. Much attention has been given to the risks associated with susceptibility to peer influence, but presumably, some (perhaps even the same) youth receive outsized benefits from exposure to the right kind of influence.

First, we consider traits. Differential susceptibility theory (Belsky & Pluess, 2009) posits that certain individuals have a heightened sensitivity to their environment, which results in more adaptive outcomes in positive contexts and more maladaptive outcomes in negative contexts. Others may have vantage-resistant traits (e.g., rejection sensitivity, ego fragility) that reduce or eliminate the benefits that typically arise from favorable conditions. Conformity dispositions, such as conscientiousness or eagerness to learn, may pave the way for adopting good habits from others. For example, children who enjoyed academic pursuits were likely to embrace new study practices, especially if their school friends tended to do well (Masland & Lease, 2013).

Children and adolescents differ in their desire for resources and in their strategies to attain them. Some acquire resources through dominance or the strategic application of prosocial behavior (Hartl et al., 2020). Positive behaviors may be more likely to be acquired through prosocial means than through coercion. The desire for status and affection, as a social goal, may motivate conformity to social norms (Veenstra & Lodder, 2022). Youth who prioritize social goals may be quick to adopt adaptive prosocial or academic behaviors in classrooms that are oriented to these goals. Finally, susceptibility may flow from perceived or actual vulnerabilities and liabilities. Thus, in one study, students with lower rates of achievement profited from working with stronger students, particularly if they were interested in the topic (DeLay et al., 2016).

Now, we consider states. Context alters the magnitude and likelihood of peer influence. Susceptibility to influence grows under conditions of uncertainty as youth look to others for guidance. Input from any source is welcome, but close relationships are more influential than distant relationships, and peers, especially similar

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peers, are more influential than adults (Laursen, 2017). Thus, positive behaviors are more likely to be adopted in the company of friends than in the company of non-friends and are more likely to be adopted in the company of best friends than in the company of other friends. Relationship quality may also contribute to the spread of positive behaviors. It may be counterintuitive to think of relationship quality as a state, but positive and negative features of relationships wax and wane within and between relationships, with the strength of a friend's influence reflecting the current quality of the relationship. To illustrate, in one study, friends' influence over adolescent alcohol consumption was strongest in relationships characterized as high in support (Urberg et al., 2005).

We could say much more about the distinction between states and traits as they relate to peer conformity (see Laursen & Faur, 2022). Here, we suggest that the distinction is critical to understanding when and to whom the profits of peer influence are distributed. Differences in traits imply that some individuals extend and receive benefits from conformity more readily than others, regardless of partners or circumstances. Differences in states imply that in some times and settings, most individuals derive positive outcomes from conforming.

CONCLUSION

Peer influence is an important social process. Constructive behavior is socialized through interactions with close others. Parents are important early sources of positive behavior, but for most Western youth, their influence is eventually rivaled and replaced by friends. Yet friends rarely get credit for good deeds and optimal outcomes. For too long, scholars have allowed a focus on the origins of problem behavior to obscure peer processes that are sources of adjustment, happiness, and flourishing. Peer influence may be key to understanding those positive outcomes.

If we want to more fully understand positive behaviors and the processes that bring about positive outcomes, we need to incorporate them into our studies and models. Researchers could start by studying the concept of fun, something that occurs overwhelmingly in the context of peers. Having fun is a source of happiness and being fun is a source of status. Peer influence is undoubtedly instrumental in the pursuit of fun and in optimal outcomes that flow from having fun. Peer influence may also play a role in the development of optimism, hope, and contentment, and the behaviors that contribute to and flow from these positive states. In a similar vein, researchers should consider whether and how peer influence contributes to positive development, such as empathy, trust, and tolerance, and to positive engagement, such as civic action, volunteering, and pro-environmental behaviors.

Our conclusions come with an important caveat. Cultural and ethnic group variability in peer experiences is poorly understood (Chen et al., 2018). Research in non-Western countries is urgently needed because nearly all studies of peer influence involve North American or European samples. Differences could emerge in the relative strength of peer influence vis-à-vis the influence of other relationships. Not all cultures emphasize peer relationships to the same extent, nor do they provide the same opportunities for peers to exercise influence.

Conformity cannot be separated from well-being. In making this argument, we do not argue that conformity is uniformly beneficial. Sometimes it is uniformly harmful. Other times, the damage is collateral, an unpleasant side effect that accompanies an anticipated benefit. Conformity is not unique among peer experiences (e.g., co-rumination) in its potential for tradeoffs with positive and negative adjustment. Individuals willingly conform because they believe that doing so is necessary for relationships to flourish and for groups to function. But the same conformity that is adaptive interpersonally can lead to forming and maintaining risk-taking behaviors, particularly among those in the company of delinquent peers. Peer influence is adaptive when applied judiciously, in moderation, at the right moments, but detrimental when coercively enforced, overdone, or applied without thought. Striking the right balance is paramount to successful development.

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