

Running head: CONFORMITY AND INTRAGROUP STATUS

When Group Members Admit To Being Conformist:
The Role of Relative Intragroup Status in Conformity Self-Reports

Jolanda Jetten

University of Exeter

Matthew J. Hornsey

University of Queensland

Inmaculada Adarves-Yorno

University of Exeter

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Abstract

Five studies examined the hypothesis that people will strategically portray the self as being more group-influenced the more junior they feel within the group. We found among social psychologists (Study 1) that ratings of self-conformity by group members were greater the lower status the participant. These effects were replicated in Studies 2, 3, and 4 in which relative intragroup status was manipulated. In Study 3, we found that junior group members described themselves as more conformist than senior members when they were addressing an ingroup audience, but when they were addressing an outgroup audience the effect disappeared. Furthermore, junior members (but not senior members) rated themselves as more conformist when they were led to believe their responses were public than when responses were private (Study 5). The discussion focuses on the strategic processes underlying low status group members' self-reports of group influence and the functional role of conformity in groups.

KEY WORDS: self-reported conformity, intragroup status, social identity, strategic behavior, self-presentation

When Group Members Admit To Being Conformist:

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The study of conformity has been at the heart of social psychological research for several decades. Since Sherif's pioneering autokinetic studies in the 1930s, there has been a vast amount of research showing that people change their behavior to be more in line with the attitudes or behaviors of others. After the Holocaust, this interest quickened in pace and set the research agenda for several decades (Farr, 1996).

Questions concerning obedience to authority, groupthink, anti-social behavior, and normative influence have been at the forefront of research attention. Indeed, the most well known studies within social psychology are concerned with conformity and social influence (e.g., Ash, 1951; Janis, 1972; Milgram, 1963; Zimbardo, 1969). As a consequence, it is probably fair to say that within social psychology an ideology has developed that conformity is the rule rather than the exception (see Friend, Rafferty, & Bramel, 1990; Moscovici, 1976; Moscovici & Faucheux, 1972, for critiques).

Interestingly, despite the convergence of evidence that people's behaviors and attitudes are influenced by relevant others, this is not always reflected in people's self-perceptions. For example, Sherif (1936) found that, when people were asked to judge how far a light moved in a dark room, their judgments were strongly influenced by the judgments of those around them. However, this social influence was either not noticed or not acknowledged by the participants themselves. Rather, "the majority of subjects reported not only that their minds were made up as to the judgments they were going to give before the others spoke, but that they were not influenced by the others in the group" (Sherif, 1965, p.450). Similarly, Schofield (1975) found that participants were more likely to act in line with their attitudes (a) when the group norm supported the

attitude, and (b) when the decision as to how to behave had to be disclosed publicly, indicating social influence. However, when Schofield asked participants what factors had impacted on their decision, not one participant spontaneously mentioned the influence of others' attitudes or behaviors. Furthermore, if prompted about these factors, the vast majority of participants claimed social influence was irrelevant to their decision (see also Braver, Linder, Corwin, & Cialdini, 1977).

More recent research by Hornsey and Jetten (2005) supports the notion that people tend to deny the influence of groups in determining behavior. When college students were asked the extent to which they were influenced by other college members, and the extent to which they conformed to the norms of the college, ratings fell significantly below the mid-point (indicating relative independence). This is despite the fact that identification with the college group was high. Interestingly, however, they rated other college students as being highly conformist. Conformity was something that happened to *other* people; in comparison, they personally were independent individuals.

In summary, then, people deny that they are influenced by their groups, but are very quick to detect such influence in others. This is despite the fact that objective data frequently show that people are influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of those around them. One possible reason for this discrepancy is that people may be aware of the influence of others, but are reluctant to admit it because it is culturally stigmatized. This is particularly likely to occur in individualistic societies, where people are taught to value independence (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995). There is an assumption in more individualistic cultures (propagated by Western popular culture) that there is something heroic in resisting the influence of the group (Baumeister, 1991; Kim &

Markus, 1999) and resistance is seen as a way of maintaining individual freedom (Worchel & Brehm, 1971). Conformity, in contrast, is often seen to reflect an uncritical, malleable mind. Consistent with this notion, those who yield to group influence and persuasive communications are evaluated more negatively by observers and are generally seen as less intelligent than those who resist persuasive messages (Braver et al., 1977; Cialdini, Braver, & Lewis, 1974). This negative valence attached to admitting to conformity is reflected also in social psychological research.

Traditionally, introductory textbooks focus on the negative outcomes of conformity behaviors in terms of distorting perception, perpetuating destructive behaviors, or reducing critical thinking, rather than on the positive consequences of conformity (e.g., maintaining harmony within groups). Indeed, the underlying drive to study conformity is probably that we are concerned in the Western world about its influence. In a culture that values being true to the personal self and sticking to principles, being conformist or easily influenced are not traits that people are likely to own up to (see Hornsey & Jetten, 2004).

Despite these culturally defined judgments about conformity, it is undeniable that conformity to group norms can serve an important function in group life, and that it is frequently valued within small groups. Although there is frequent rhetoric regarding the importance of “being yourself”, such non-conformity is typically punished if it violates specific group norms (Marques, Abrams, & Serôdio, 2001; McAuliffe, Jetten, Hornsey, & Hogg, 2003). So although there may be broad cultural messages about the dangers of conformity and admitting to it, these meta-norms are intersected and qualified by specific norms within groups, where admitting to conformity might have a

more positive valence. Thus, when a particular group identity is salient, people might feel there are some strategic benefits to portraying the self as *open* to group influence.

In this paper we examine how self-reports of conformity are tailored strategically depending on perceived relative intragroup status. Our basic idea is that, although conformity may have negative connotations for individuals, from a group's point of view admitting to conformity is generally valued. We predict that people are more motivated than usual to portray themselves as conformist and influenced by the group when they feel their intragroup status is relatively low and that they are reporting to a higher status audience. By doing this, low status people might hope to endear themselves to other group members by proving their "groupy" credentials. In contrast, when relative ingroup status is perceived to be high, the need to strategically portray the self as responsive to group influence is weaker. Below, we report five studies that lend support to this notion. Before describing these studies, however, we first review literature on the relationship between one's position within a group and conformity.

Intragroup Position and Conformity

Previous research has shown that the need to conform to specific group norms is not equally pressing for everyone. For instance, Hollander (1958) introduced the notion of idiosyncrasy credit to describe how group members can accumulate psychological credits over time, which allows them greater latitudes of acceptable behavior. In other words, senior group members who have demonstrated over time their adherence to group norms are given more latitude to become agents of change and to steer the group in new directions. It also allows them to be critical of, and to challenge, group decisions (Cartwright, 1959; Hollander & Julian, 1970; Sherif & Sherif, 1964). Consistent with this idea, Sherif and Sherif (1964) showed that in adolescent gangs the latitude of

acceptable behavior was greater for leaders of the gang than for lower status group members. The leader was only expected to follow rules when the identity of the group was threatened or when interacting with outgroups. This is rather consistent with recent research showing that prototypical leaders have more “license” than leaders whose position is more insecure (Haslam, 2004).

Recent research also suggests that the variability in *actual* behavior differs for those who differ in status or power. Guinote, Judd, and Brauer (2002) showed that variability in interpersonal behavior was higher in powerful groups than in less powerful groups. These authors conclude that: “individuals who are in more powerful positions actually act and present themselves in more idiosyncratic and variable ways” (p. 718). It is likely, then, that this greater freedom to act as one wishes for high status ingroup members translates into less perceived pressure to self-present as being group-influenced. This reasoning is also consistent with recent research showing that prototypical group members are less affected by self-presentational considerations than are peripheral group members (Jetten, Hornsey, Spears, Haslam, & Cowell, 2005).

In contrast, we would argue that admitting to conformity to group norms is imperative for those who are peripheral or who have low intragroup status. This reasoning is consistent with the model of group socialization proposed by Levine and Moreland (1994; Moreland, 1995; see also Worchel, 1998). It is argued that when individuals enter pre-existing groups, they may be exposed to considerable pressure to assimilate to group norms and ideologies. Public displays of group loyalty are important ways for new, peripheral, or ostracized group members to make bids for acceptance (see Jetten, Branscombe, & Spears, in press; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). For example, Noel, Wann, and Branscombe (1995) demonstrated that peripheral

group members expressed more outgroup derogation than prototypical outgroup members, but only when they believed that other group members might learn of their responses. Our argument also links in with a broader literature that suggests group members with low or peripheral status are particularly mindful of the strategic value of group behavior, and are more responsive to the context when deciding the attitudes and behaviors that they should express (Barreto & Ellemers, 2000; Barreto, Spears, Ellemers, & Shahinper, 2003; Jetten, Branscombe, Spears, & McKimmie, 2003; Jetten et al., 2005; Noel et al., 1995; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995; Sassenberg & Postmes, 2002; Spears & Lea, 1994).

The Present Research

In the present research, we examine how strategic needs might affect how people portray themselves in terms of traits of conformity and group influence. As described earlier, there is evidence that people are generally reluctant to acknowledge that they are influenced by their social world, and that they prefer to project an image of themselves as independent (Hornsey & Jetten, 2005; Schofield, 1975; Sherif, 1965). There are good reasons to expect, however, that this tendency might be attenuated when people are presenting themselves to other group members. To communicate to other group members that you are relatively influenced by others and are prepared to conform to norms suggests that you will be malleable to the group's needs and committed to maintaining harmony.

Participants across five studies rated the extent to which they are influenced by group norms and to what extent *other* people are influenced by group norms. In line with previous observations (e.g., Hornsey & Jetten, 2005), we expected that there would be a general tendency for people to portray the self as relatively non-conformist.

However, we expected that these self-portrayals would vary as a function of relative intragroup status, and that for strategic reasons people would rate themselves as more conformist when they were reporting to higher status group members than when they were reporting to lower status group members. In Study 1, relative intragroup status was inferred from biographical data, whereas in the four subsequent studies status was manipulated directly. In Studies 3 and 5, we tested more specifically our assumptions about the strategic nature of conformity self-reports by manipulating whether conformity ratings were made to an ingroup or outgroup audience (Study 3), or in a public or private context (Study 5).

Study 1

In our first study, we sent an e-mail questionnaire to a list of Australasian social psychologists. We asked them to rate the extent to which they were susceptible to group influence and the extent to which they believed people in general were susceptible to group influence. Because the responses were returned via e-mail, it was clear to the participants that their responses would be identifiable to the experimenters. Status of the participants was inferred on the basis of the number of years the participants had spent in academia. Although not perfect, we reasoned that this would provide a rough index of the extent to which participants would feel high or low status relative to the audience (the experimenters).¹ We also asked researchers to indicate their main area of research and, on the basis of those responses, made a distinction between researchers who define themselves as group researchers, and those who are interested in other social psychological research areas (e.g., health, interpersonal communication). This distinction was made because our predictions were formulated in terms of how people

self-present to other *ingroup* members. It has repeatedly been shown that ingroup members exert greater social influence than outgroup members (Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner, 1990; Turner, 1991) and that self-presentation and self-ratings of conformity would only be affected when presenting to ingroup but not to outgroup members. Because social psychology comprises well-defined and largely discrete sub-disciplines, we reasoned that the audience (in this case two researchers in group processes) would only be viewed as ingroup members by other people who identify themselves with this sub-discipline.

Overall, we predicted that our participants would see themselves to be less conformist than other people. Our key prediction, however, was that self-ratings of conformity would be higher when the participants were lower in status than when they were higher in status relative to their audience. Furthermore, we expected that this relationship would only emerge for members of the ingroup, but not for those who felt they were addressing an outgroup audience.

Method

Participants and Design

The questionnaire was sent to an e-mail address that was subscribed to by social psychologists in Australia and New Zealand. Seventy-one people responded (34 female and 37 male) with level of research experience ranging from 2 to 48 years ($M = 12.41$ years). Of the overall sample, 22 identified themselves as being researchers of group processes and/or intergroup relations (labeled ingroup). The remaining 49 respondents were specialists in fields of social psychology other than group processes and intergroup relations (labeled outgroup).

Measures

Respondents were told that we were engaging in “a small survey on how people relate to groups”. Respondents were then asked to indicate their agreement to 4 items on a scale ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 9 (“very much”). Two items assessed self-ratings of conformity: “I am easily influenced by the groups to which I belong” and “I generally conform to the norms of the groups to which I belong”, $r(71) = .65, p < .001$. These two items were then repeated, but reworded to measure the extent to which people felt they applied to *other* people (“People in general are easily influenced by the groups to which they belong” and “People generally conform to the norms of the groups to which they belong”; $r(71) = .62, p < .001$). Participants then recorded how many years they had been in academia, calculated from the first year of their PhD.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary Analyses

For preliminary analyses, discrepancy scores were calculated by subtracting the self-ratings of conformity from the other-ratings. Thus, the higher the discrepancy score, the less the self is seen as being group-influenced relative to people in general. Consistent with Hornsey and Jetten (2005), a significant discrepancy emerged, $t(70) = 9.30, p < .001$. Academics considered themselves to be less conformist ($M = 3.93, SD = 1.62$) than people in general ($M = 5.72, SD = 1.29$). One-sample t-tests showed that self-ratings were below the midpoint of the scale, $t(70) = 5.56, p < .001$, whereas other-ratings were significantly above the mid-point of the scale, $t(70) = 4.68, p < .001$.

Conformity and Status

We conducted a median split on the length of time our participants had been in academia, to create categories of junior ($M = 5.79$ years, $SD = 2.42$) and senior ($M =$

20.87 years, $SD = 8.78$) researchers. Junior researchers had been in academia between 2 and 9 years and the range for senior researchers was from 10 to 48 years. Analysis of variance on the self-ratings revealed a significant main effect for intragroup status, $F(1, 64) = 8.50, p = .005$. Junior researchers perceived the self as more conformist ($M = 4.53, SD = 1.47$) than did senior researchers ($M = 3.73, SD = 1.57$). This main effect, however, was qualified by an interaction between type of researcher and intragroup status, $F(1, 64) = 7.51, p = .008$ (see Table 1). Simple main effects revealed that junior ingroup researchers perceived the self as more conformist than junior outgroup researchers, $F(1, 65) = 5.40, p = .024$ (one-tailed). Furthermore, within the ingroup researchers, junior researchers perceived themselves as more conformist than senior researchers, $F(1, 65) = 13.16, p < .001$ (one-tailed). The remaining two simple main effects were not significant.² Furthermore, the effects of status and group membership only emerged on self-ratings; there were no main or interaction effects on other-ratings, all F 's < 1.34 .

Consistent with predictions, people portrayed themselves to be less conformist the higher status they were, but this effect was only significant when the self-ratings were identifiable to other ingroup members (i.e., other group researchers). Where the audience was not a member of the participant's ingroup, there was no difference in self-perceptions as a function of status. When feeling relatively junior and reporting to relatively high status ingroup members, people may have felt that it is advantageous to portray the self as being open to group influence. However, when feeling relatively senior and communicating with lower status ingroup members, or when communicating

with members of a different subgroup, this need to demonstrate one's "groupy" credentials is less strong.

Study 2

Arguably, status was assessed rather indirectly in Study 1 (as the years participants had spent in academia). In Study 2 we improved our design by manipulating intragroup status directly. In this study, undergraduate psychology students completed an e-mail survey that they were led to believe would be identifiable either to a lecturer (making them junior status relative to their audience) or to other undergraduates (making them equal in status relative to their audience). We predicted that intragroup status (junior or equal) would have no effects on other-ratings of conformity, but that it would influence people's self-ratings. Specifically, we predicted that participants in the junior status condition would rate themselves as more conformist than would participants in the equal status condition.

Method

Participants and Design

Respondents were 64 undergraduate psychology students from the University of Exeter (29 first-year, 15 second-year, 15 third-year students, and 5 missing). Data were collected via e-mail, and participation was voluntary. Intragroup status was manipulated (junior versus equal).

Procedure and Measures

An email was sent from a research assistant's account to all undergraduate students (approximately 300 in total). Students were asked to participate in a small pilot survey on how people relate to groups. Intragroup status was manipulated by giving feedback that the data were collected on behalf of the first author of this paper, or that

the research assistant was helping a group of second year students to collect data. By varying the experimenter, status relative to the audience was expected to be low in the former comparison (junior status condition), but equal relative to the latter source (equal status condition). *Self-ratings* ($r = .59, p < .001$) and *other-ratings* ($r = .77, p < .001$) of conformity were assessed using the same items described in Study 1.

Results and Discussion

Overall, respondents perceived that other people conform more ($M = 6.16, SD = 1.25$) than they themselves do ($M = 4.62, SD = 1.51$), $t(61) = 8.40, p < .001$. Self-perceived conformity was not significantly different from the mid-point of the scale, $t(63) = 1.63, p = .108$, whereas conformity perceptions in others were significantly higher than the mid-point of the scale, $t(61) = 7.31, p < .001$.

Subsequent analyses compared self-ratings and other-ratings of conformity separately as a function of intragroup status (see Table 2). As predicted, participants were more likely to perceive the self as conformist when they felt junior in comparison to the audience ($M = 5.11, SD = 1.43$) than when they saw themselves as equal in status, $M = 3.98, SD = 3.98, F(1, 62) = 9.26, p = .003$. In contrast, ratings of the extent to which people in general were conformist (other-ratings) did not differ between the junior and equal status conditions. An additional ANCOVA in which year was included as a covariate to check whether first years, second years and final year students differed in self perceived conformity did not alter the results (the regression of the covariate was non-significant, $F(1, 56) = 0.14, p = .714$). In summary, those who felt junior relative to the audience were more likely to ascribe conformity to him or herself than were those who felt equal in terms of status to the audience.

Study 3

A third study was conducted to replicate and extend the findings by addressing two methodological limitations of the first two studies. First, self and other ratings were not tied to a salient social identity in Studies 1 and 2; rather these items assessed the extent to which participants viewed themselves and others to be conformist with respect to groups in general. Although we assume that participants' identity as academics was salient and underpinned their responses in Study 1 - and that their psychology identity was salient in Study 2 - we do not have empirical evidence for this. In Study 3, we made sure that questions about conformity and influence were tied directly to the psychology identity.

Second, we assumed that results of the first two studies reflected that people felt they were responding to an ingroup audience (a group processes researcher in Study 1 and fellow psychologists in Study 2). However, we assessed the effect of group membership rather indirectly in Study 1 and we did not check in Study 2 whether the lecturer and psychology student were both perceived as ingroup members³. In Study 3, intragroup status was manipulated by asking second and third year psychology students to take part in a short pilot study via e-mail that was conducted by a third year student. Relative to the third year student, second year participants were identifiable to a more senior student (junior status) and third year participants were identifiable to someone of their own year (equal status). We manipulated whether the audience was an ingroup member or an outgroup member by introducing the study as being conducted by a psychology student (ingroup) or a political science student (outgroup). We predicted that junior group members would admit to being more conformist than senior members

when responding to an ingroup audience, but not when responding to an outgroup audience. We predicted that equal status group members' responses would not be affected by group membership of the audience.

Method

Participants and Design

Respondents were 23 second year and 26 third year students from the University of Exeter who voluntarily took part in a short email study. The design was a 2 (Intragroup status: junior versus equal status) by 2 (Group membership of the audience: ingroup versus outgroup) between-subjects design with random allocation to conditions.

Procedure

An email was sent from a psychology student (ingroup audience) or from a political science student (outgroup audience) to all second and third year psychology students (250 in total). Group membership of the researcher was made salient by varying the subject of the email. The subject was either "2 minutes to help psychology student" or "2 minutes to help politics student". Furthermore, it was stated at the beginning of the email: "I'm a third year psychology student (or political science student) and as part of my requirements for my final year project, I'm conducting this small pilot survey of how psychology students relate to groups". Because the audience in this case was a 3rd-year student, 2nd-year participants were interpreted as having relatively low status and 3rd-year participants were interpreted as having equal status relative to the audience.

All responses were made on 9-point scales ranging from "not at all" (1) to "very much" (9). Recognizing that the pool of 2nd and 3rd-year students is smaller than the

potential pool in the other studies, we decided to keep the ‘pilot’ very short and we only included single item measures of influence to ensure a good response rate. These items were slightly adjusted and now referred explicitly to comparisons of self and others to the group “psychology students”. Items were: “I am easily influenced by other psychology students” and “Other psychology students in general are easily influenced by other psychology students”.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary Analyses

Participants did not rate other psychology students as more influenced ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.73$) than themselves ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.71$), $t(48) = 1.35$, $p = .184$, with both self-ratings and other-ratings significantly below the midpoint of the scale, $t(48) = 3.02$, $p = .004$, and $t(48) = 2.14$, $p = .037$, respectively. One reason for this finding may be that participants were more hesitant to rate others as conformist when ratings are made in the context of a specific identity (fellow psychology students) than when people are asked to rate conformity of people in general as in Studies 1 and 2.

Subsequent analyses examined the role of audience group membership and intragroup status on the self-ratings and other-ratings of influence. In line with predictions, we found no effects on the other-rating item, and a marginally significant interaction between audience group membership and intragroup status on the self-rating item, $F(1, 45) = 3.93$, $p = .053$ (Table 3). Simple main effect analyses revealed that when addressing an ingroup audience, participants rated themselves as more conformist when they felt junior ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.25$) than when they felt equal in status ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.77$), $F(1, 46) = 5.37$, $p = .013$ (one-tailed). Self-ratings did not differ between the junior and equal intragroup status condition when the audience was an

outgroup member, $F(1, 46) = .05, p = .829$. The other two simple main effects were not significant.

In sum, junior group members described themselves as more conformist than senior members when they were addressing an ingroup audience, but when they were addressing an outgroup audience the effect disappeared. Of course, admitting to being influenced to ingroup members is more likely to help speed up the acceptance process when addressing an ingroup member than an outgroup member. Thus, this finding provides further evidence for strategic self-presentation by junior group members as well as reinforcing the findings of Study 1.

Study 4

Although we found consistent evidence in all three previous studies for the effects of intragroup status, a weakness of Studies 2 and 3 is that we included equal intragroup status rather than senior intragroup status conditions. In Study 4, we manipulated intragroup status more explicitly by emphasizing participants' junior or senior status relative to a comparison group. In previous studies we manipulated relative status by either allowing the participants to vary across conditions or allowing the audience to vary across conditions, opening up the possibility of confounds. To avoid this, in Study 4 we more directly primed participants to feel junior or senior through the use of instructions. We also included manipulation checks in this study to ascertain that effects are caused by differences in the perception of intragroup status. Participants then rated the extent to which they conformed to the group "psychology students" and the extent to which they felt psychology students in general conformed to this group.

Again, we predicted that intragroup status would have no effects on other-ratings of conformity, but that it would influence people's self-ratings. Specifically, we predicted that participants in the junior status condition would rate themselves as more conformist than would participants in the higher status condition.

Method

Participants and Design

Respondents were 32 first year psychology students from the University of Exeter who voluntarily took part in a short email study. Intragroup status was manipulated (17 participants in the junior and 15 in the senior condition) and dependent measures assessed ratings of conformity both in relation to the self and in relation to psychology students in general.

Procedure

An email was sent from a research assistant's account to all first year psychology students (120 in total). To ensure that the experimenter was perceived as a fellow student (and an ingroup member), we mentioned that the research assistant was a student collecting data for their Masters project. The study was introduced as an investigation into how people relate to groups. Intragroup status was manipulated by drawing comparisons with more senior or more junior groups within the broader group of psychologists. In the junior status condition participants read: "Your responses will be compared to the responses of professional psychologists. We are interested to find out more on the views of more junior psychology students". In the senior condition, participants were told: "Your responses will be compared to the responses of college

students who take psychology as a subject. We are interested to find out more on the views of more senior psychology students.”⁴

Measures

All responses were made on 9-point scales ranging from “not at all” (1) to “very much” (9). To examine whether the manipulation of intragroup status was internalised and affected self-perceptions we included two manipulation checks: “I see myself as relatively junior in the group psychology students” and “I see myself as a newcomer to the group psychology students”, $r(34) = .56, p < .001$. Measures were the same as those used in Studies 1 and 2, but as in Study 3 the questions were adapted to apply specifically to the identity “psychology students”. *Self-ratings* ($r(34) = .59, p < .001$) and *other-ratings* ($r(34) = .81, p < .001$) were averaged.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check

In line with the manipulation, we found a significant effect for intragroup status, $t(30) = 1.89, p = .035$ (one-tailed), indicating that those in the junior condition felt more junior ($M = 5.26$) than did those in the senior condition ($M = 4.17$).

Conformity and Status

We found that participants rated other psychology students to be more conformist ($M = 4.75, SD = 1.51$) than themselves, $M = 4.01, SD = 1.68, t(33) = 2.50, p = .018$. Whereas overall self-ratings were, as in the previous studies, significantly below the midpoint of the scale, $t(33) = 3.43, p = .002$, other-ratings were not different from the midpoint, $t(33) = 0.97, p = .341$. As found in Study 3, this suggests that other ratings are tempered when they have to be made in the context of a specific identity,

although in this case the self-other discrepancy survived.

Further analyses were conducted to examine self-ratings and other-ratings as a function of intragroup status (see Table 4). In line with predictions, we found that participants perceived themselves as more conformist when they felt junior in the group ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.79$) than when they felt more senior, $M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.44$, $t(32) = 2.22$, $p = .034$. Again, ratings of conformity on behalf of other psychology students did not differ between the junior and senior intragroup status condition, $t(32) = 0.79$, $p = .434$.

In sum, participants were more likely to report being influenced by the group when they felt relatively junior than when they felt relatively senior. Our reasoning that differences in intragroup status underlie these effects is strengthened because status was manipulated directly in this study.

Study 5

In the previous studies we assumed that the underlying motivation for juniors to admit more to being conformist than senior group members is that these group members are more concerned about strategic self-presentation to the group than are senior members (Jetten et al., 2004; Noel et al., 1995; see also Barreto & Ellemers, 2000). However, one weakness of our research was that we only examined this prediction under public response conditions. In other words, we do not have any evidence that this effect is more pronounced when response conditions are public than when they are private, which would be the strongest test for our interpretation of strategic behaviour by junior group members (see MacDonald & Nail, 2005; Nail, MacDonald, & Levy, 2000; Reicher et al., 1995; Spears & Lea, 1994).

An alternative explanation for the findings of some of the previous studies is

that junior group members reported to be more conformist than senior group members because they genuinely see themselves to be more influenced by others than senior group members (Guinote et al., 2002). According to this alternative explanation, the conformity ratings of participants in our studies are not strategic or targeted, but rather reflect the changing self-definition of group members when they are made to feel more or less high in status. Although Studies 1 and 3 already provide some evidence that self-ratings are tailored to the audience one is addressing (and strategic in that sense), Study 5 was designed to directly address this issue and rule out this alternative explanation.

Participants' identity as psychologists was again made salient in this final study. We manipulated intragroup status in the same way as in Study 4, such that participants were made to feel relatively junior or relatively senior to other group members. Participants were then asked to rate the extent to which they, and psychology students in general, were conformist in relation to their group. Response mode was manipulated such that participants were led to believe that their responses were private and anonymous or public and identifiable. If, as we assume, self-ratings of conformity are influenced by strategic considerations, we expect that the tendency for junior group members to see themselves as more conformist than senior group members should only emerge in the public conditions. If the previous results are simply a function of how relative status influences group members' self-definitions, we would expect that junior participants will rate themselves as more conformist both in public and private conditions.

Method

Participants and Design

Respondents were 71 first year psychology students from the University of Exeter. The study utilized a 2 (Intragroup status: junior versus senior) by 2 (Response mode: public versus private) between-participants design with random allocation to conditions.

Procedure

Students were approached at the beginning of a lecture. The male experimenter introduced himself as a fellow student collecting data for his final year project. All students agreed to participate and they handed the completed questionnaire to the experimenter at the end of the lecture. The study was again introduced as an investigation into how people relate to groups. Intragroup status was manipulated in the same way as in Study 2. Response mode was manipulated via experimental instructions delivered at the beginning of the questionnaire. In the private response mode condition participants were given standard reassurances about the fact that their responses were anonymous and that individual responses would not be published in any form. In the public condition it was stated: “participants in this investigation may be required via email to explain their response to the questions. Note that, due to the nature of email, we cannot ensure anonymity. The findings of the study will be made available to psychology students and will be posted on the web that can be accessed from the psychology website”. Participants in the public condition were then asked to write down their name and email address.

Participants could complete the questionnaire at their own pace. They then received a written debriefing, reassuring those in the public condition that their

responses were anonymous and that all identifying information would be removed from the questionnaire. Participants were also given an opportunity to express their thoughts about the research after the lecture and a research assistant was available for those who had any further concerns.

Measures

All responses were made on 7-point scales ranging from “strongly disagree”(1) to “strongly agree”(7). The manipulation of intragroup status was checked with the item: “I see myself as relatively junior in the group psychology students”. The response mode manipulation was checked with two items: “I believe the anonymity of my responses is secure within this study” (reverse scored) and “I believe my responses will be public”, $r(71) = .46, p < .001$. Self-ratings and other-ratings were assessed using the same items as used in Study 4 (self-ratings; $r(71) = .68, p < .001$; other-ratings $r(71) = .74, p < .001$).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks

Analysis of variance revealed only a main effect for intragroup status on the intragroup status check, $F(1, 70) = 4.05, p = .048$, indicating that those in the junior condition felt more junior ($M = 4.59, SD = 1.24$) than did those in the senior condition ($M = 3.88, SD = 1.64$). In addition, analysis of the response mode check revealed only a main effect for response mode, $F(1, 70) = 26.54, p < .001$. Those in the private response mode condition felt that their responses were less public ($M = 2.24, SD = 0.85$) than did those in the public response mode condition ($M = 3.68, SD = 1.48$).

Conformity, Status, and Response Mode

We again found that participants rated other psychology students ($M = 4.09, SD$

= 0.92) as more conformist than themselves, $M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.16$, $t(70) = 4.58$, $p = .001$. Self-ratings were significantly below the midpoint of the scale, $t(70) = 3.79$, $p = .001$, and other-ratings were not different from the midpoint, $t(70) = 0.84$, $p = .404$.

We then examined self-ratings and other-ratings as a function of intragroup status and response mode. There were no significant main effects on the self-ratings, but a marginally significant interaction emerged between intragroup status and response mode, $F(1, 68) = 3.90$, $p = .053$ (see Table 5). In line with predictions, junior group members perceived themselves as more conformist when their responses were public than when they were private, $F(1, 66) = 6.23$, $p = .008$ (one-tailed). In addition, there was a tendency in the public condition for junior group members to rate themselves as more conformist than senior group members, $F(1, 66) = 2.42$, $p = .063$ (one-tailed). The remaining two simple main effects were not significant. Neither did effects of intragroup status or response mode emerge on other-ratings of conformity.

In sum, Study 5 lends support for the impression management explanation of why junior group members are relatively willing to describe themselves as conformist. The strategic element of their behaviour is highlighted by the finding that junior participants were more likely to describe themselves as conformist when their responses were identifiable and public than when they were anonymous and private. This finding provides no support for the alternative explanation that the manipulation of status affects group members' self-definition, and that ratings were made independently of strategic considerations.

General Discussion

Four of the five studies - conducted among academics and among psychology undergraduate students - revealed a self-other discrepancy in conformity ratings.

Whereas people were generally reluctant to portray the self as conformist (self-ratings of conformity lay below the mid-point of the scale), they were less reluctant to portray *others* as conformist (other-ratings on the mid-point or significantly above the mid-point of the scale).⁵ This replicates the sizeable self-other discrepancy on conformity traits previously identified by Hornsey and Jetten (2005). Like the ordinary population, students and social psychologists see themselves as being at least partially immune to the group influence they attribute to others.

The present research set out to examine the question of whether relative intragroup status was an important determinant of the extent to which people portray the self as conformist. We argue that self-presentation as being susceptible to group influence may help to ensure greater acceptance by other more senior group members, may speed up the acceptance process, and may provide hope to improve the rather peripheral status junior group members have (see Jetten et al., 2003). Thus, we expected that people would be more likely to portray themselves as conformist when they felt themselves to have low status than when they felt they had high status.

In Study 1, this effect was observed after inferring status from the length of time participants had been in academia. However, it should be noted that the operationalization of status (length of time in academia) is naturally confounded with age. While we acknowledge this to be a weakness of the design of the study, it is interesting to speculate what effect this might have had on the data. One alternative explanation for the data – that people simply get more independent-minded as they get older, and that this is driving the relationship between status and conformity – can be ruled out. The fact that the relationship between status and conformity only exists

among group researchers suggests that there is no generalized link between age and perceptions of self-conformity in our sample.

To enhance the confidence in our reasoning, we conducted four more studies in which we manipulated rather than measured relative intragroup position. We again found that those who felt junior were more willing to admit to conformity than those who felt more senior. The fact that the same pattern of results emerged across different studies, across different samples, and using both experimental and correlational designs is reassuring and provides greater confidence in our reasoning.

Studies 3 and 5 provided explicit evidence for the strategic nature of junior group members' self reported conformity. Junior group members described themselves as more conformist than senior members when they were addressing an ingroup audience, but when they were addressing an outgroup audience the effect disappeared (Study 3). Similarly, junior group members admitted to being more conformist when they believed their responses would be made public than when they thought their responses would remain private (Study 5). As a result, there was a tendency for junior participants to rate themselves as more conformist than senior group members in the public conditions, but not in the private conditions. This finding rules out an alternative explanation for the main effect for intragroup status findings (Studies 1, 2 and 4) that junior group members genuinely see themselves to be more influenced by the group than senior group members (Guinote et al., 2002). Indeed, this finding challenges more generally the notion that low status group members are by definition more conformist and influenced by the group than high status group members. Rather, we argue that those with low status, low power, or an insecure position in the group are more sensitive to the social context, and that their responses are driven more by strategic

considerations than are those with high status, high power, or secure intragroup position (see Barreto & Ellemers, 2000; Barreto et al., 2003; Jetten et al., 2005).

Related to this, we caution against concluding from these studies that low status group members will declare their loyalty to the group by habitually admitting to group influence. Rather, for conformity expressions to have their intended strategic impact (i.e., greater acceptance within the group), conformity and emphasizing one's "groupy" credentials has to be normative for the group. Indeed, we would expect that when group norms prescribe independence or individuality, those with low status (compared to high status group members) should strategically present themselves as *less* conformist than others when their responses are public (see Jetten, Postmes, & McAuliffe, 2002). The guiding influence of group norms in strategically admitting to being conformist is an avenue for further research.

Final Comments

In the current studies, we show how ratings of conformity changed dramatically depending on whether participants were made to feel junior or senior relative to the audience. People portrayed themselves as independent and non-conformist when they felt relatively senior compared to the audience, or when addressing members of outgroups. But when feeling relatively junior with regard to an ingroup audience, the self-portrait was of a person who is sensitive to the influence of those around them and respectful of group norms. Codol (1984, p.317) once argued that "both conformity and resistance to conformity are fundamentally linked to the image of oneself that one wishes to present to others." In other words, expressions of conformity are intertwined with self-presentational issues (see also Baumeister, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). So the person who presents themselves as a good team player and someone who takes

into account the views of their boss may present themselves in other contexts as the independent-minded individual who marches to the beat of their own drum. Although on the surface this seems to be a striking double standard, it is one that has an obvious strategic function (Barreto & Ellemers, 1990; Jetten et al., 2003; Noel et al., 1995, see also Reicher et al., 1995; Spears & Lea, 1994). In conclusion, if we are interested in finding out the extent to which people think they are susceptible to group influence, we should be mindful of who it is who is doing the asking and the position people have within the group.

While we have stressed the self-presentational function of admitting to being conformist in a group, this should be appreciated in the light of a quest for a greater recognition of the positive aspects of conformity. A group fares well when its members give preference to social goals over their personal goals and when they are generally concerned with maintaining harmony. Although the notion of conformity has negative connotations in many individualistic societies (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004; Kim & Markus, 1999), admitting to conformity might have more of a positive valence when it is associated with cooperation and following group rules that are essential for group functioning (Tyler & Blader, 2000). In fact, the starting point of classic research on conformity and obedience by Milgram (1963) was that conformity is on the whole positive and functional for the group and that conformity and obedience would only under some conditions lead to uncritical thinking and undesirable behavior. Generally, it is in the interests of a group as a whole to have group members who occasionally set aside personal goals for group goals and who are willing to act in accordance with rules and norms of the group (Turner, 1991) and actually admit to value such behaviors. It is

this positive value that groups place on conformity that affects self-presentational and strategic expressions of conformity by junior group members.

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Authors Note

Jolanda Jetten, School of Psychology, University of Exeter, United Kingdom;
Matthew J. Hornsey, School of Psychology, University of Queensland, Australia;
Inmaculada Adarves-Yorno, School of Psychology, University of Exeter, United
Kingdom.

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Address correspondence to Jolanda Jetten at the School of Psychology,
University of Exeter, Exeter EX4 4QG, United Kingdom. E-mail: j.jetten@exeter.ac.uk

Endnotes

1. At the time of this study, both the first and the second author who conducted this study were postdoctoral fellows and were thus more senior than most of the junior researchers (a group that consisted mainly of postgraduate students) but more junior to the senior researchers in this sample. We personally knew all group researchers in the sample and knew most of the non-group researchers.
2. We also examined our data using regression analyses and found the same pattern of results as when we assessed the effect of intragroup status using a median-split approach.
3. Note that even if the lecturer had been perceived as an outgroup member and the fellow student as an ingroup member in Study 2, this would not provide an alternative explanation for the findings. It is difficult to see why participants would want to present as more conformist to outgroup than to ingroup members.
4. Note that in the British educational system, college is a 1 or 2 year preparation course for university. Given this, it seems reasonable to expect that first-year university students would feel high status relative to college students.
5. One of the reasons why we did not observe a self-other discrepancy in admitting to conformity in Study 3 may well relate to the fact that we only included one item to assess self-ratings and other ratings. Arguably, admitting to be influenced is less negative than admitting to be conformist and this could have tempered the self-other discrepancy (see Hoorens, 1993).

Table 1. Study 1: Self-Ratings of Conformity Among Academics as a Function of Participants' Intragroup Status and Group Membership of Audience

Intragroup status	Group Membership of Audience			
	Ingroup		Outgroup	
Junior	5.31 ^b	(1.47)	3.76 ^a	(1.48)
Senior	3.06 ^a	(1.49)	3.69 ^a	(1.60)

Note. Cells with different superscripts differ significantly from each other ($p < .05$, one-tailed) in an analysis of simple main effects. Numbers in parentheses represent standard deviations.

Table 2. Study 2: Self-Ratings and Other-Ratings of Conformity as a Function of Participants' Intragroup Status.

Intragroup status	Conformity	
	Self-ratings	Other-ratings
Junior	5.11 ^a (1.43)	6.32 (1.25)
Equal	3.87 ^b (1.46)	5.90 (1.23)

Note. Cells with superscripts within columns differ significantly from each other ($p < .05$). Numbers in parentheses represent standard deviations.

Table 3. Study 3: Self-Ratings of Conformity Among Psychology Students as a Function of Participants' Intragroup Status and Audience Group Membership

Intragroup status	Audience Group Membership	
	Ingroup	Outgroup
Junior	5.33 ^a (1.23)	4.07 ^{ab} (1.64)
Equal	3.50 ^b (1.77)	4.22 ^{ab} (1.80)

Note. Cells with different superscripts differ significantly from each other ($p < .05$) in an analysis of simple main effects. Numbers in parentheses represent standard deviations.

Table 4. Study 4: Self-Ratings and Other-Ratings of Conformity among Psychology Students as a Function of Participants' Intragroup Status

Intragroup status	Perceived Conformity	
	Self-ratings	Other-ratings
Junior	4.58 ^a (1.73)	4.94 (1.11)
Senior	3.38 ^b (1.40)	4.53 (1.88)

Note. Cells with superscripts within columns differ significantly from each other ($p < .05$). Numbers in parentheses represent standard deviations.

Table 5. Study 5: Self-Ratings of Conformity Among Psychology Students as a Function of Intragroup Position and Response Mode

Intragroup status	Response mode	
	Private	Public
Junior	3.16 ^a (1.12)	4.06 ^b (0.96)
Senior	3.58 ^{ab} (0.94)	3.47 ^{ab} (1.23)

Note. Cells with different superscripts differ significantly from each other ($p < .05$, one-tailed) in an analysis of simple main effects. Note that the difference between junior group members and senior group members in the public response condition was marginally significant, $p = .063$ (one-tailed). Numbers in parentheses represent standard deviations.