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Test Taking: A Research Proposal to Examine the Pressures to Conform on High and Low Self-Monitors

Jeremy M. Reinblatt*

The proposed study will add to the prior research on self-monitoring and conformity. It will investigate whether conformity can be induced in a test taking situation, and whether people who are high or low in self-monitoring (SM) differ in their level of conformity. Participants will be 80 undergraduate students who will complete the Self-Monitoring Scale (SMS; Snyder, 1974). They will then take a test consisting of 50 math questions, while in a room of confederates who leave either early or later. The time it takes for participants to hand in their test will be measured. Expected results are that participants who are high in SM will conform the most to confederates. Implications, such as test structure, as well as limitations and future directions are discussed.

Intuition tells us, when in a test situation people tend to experience peer pressure to complete the test at the same time as others (i.e. not earlier or later than everyone else). This study is designed to empirically investigate this intuition, by examining the effects of peer pressure on the amount of time people take to complete a task, by conforming to the group. This study will investigate whether or not individuals' own times to complete a task are affected by the amount of time it takes others to complete the same task. The study will also examine whether people differ in the time it takes them to complete the task if they are high in self-monitoring or low in self-monitoring (SM). This study will attempt to add to the literature on self-monitoring, specifically looking at whether the distinction between levels of self-monitoring affects how people are influenced by others in a test-taking situation. These implications are further discussed at the end of the paper.

High self-monitors (HSM) are individuals who pay close attention to social cues and their behaviour is not based on personal attitudes; rather, it is based on the attitudes and beliefs of others (Snyder, Gangestad, & Simpson, 1983). Individuals categorized as low self-monitors (LSM) form their own attitudes and opinions and demonstrate them in social situations. Their

behaviour is driven by their inner attitudes and beliefs (Snyder et al., 1983). SM is often measured by the Self-Monitoring Scale (SMS; Snyder, 1974).

The SM construct has been empirically validated by many studies. In a study conducted by Snyder et al. (1983), participants were given 12 pairs of choices of leisure activities and friends. More specifically, the choices involved engaging either in an activity with a well-liked friend who was not a specialist in that activity or a not-well-liked friend who was a specialist in that activity. Results showed that HSMs chose to engage in the activity with the not-well-liked friend who was a specialist more than LSMs. This suggests that HSMs look to others to determine their own behaviour, and they conform by receiving behavioural cues from others, whereas LSMs prefer to engage in an activity with a well-liked and similar friend towards whom they have a favourable opinion of. These findings lay the groundwork for the present research which hopes to link the construct of SM to conformity in a test situation, where HSMs are predicted to conform to the behaviour of others more than LSMs.

Snyder et al. (1983) conducted a further experiment wherein participants identified particular members of their social groups and activities they like to engage in with those individuals. HSMs were found to engage in

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activities with people who are not necessarily similar to them, whereas LSMs preferred to interact with people who are similar to them in attitudes, opinions, beliefs, etc. This once again provides insight into the SM construct for the current study, suggesting that LSMs conform to only similar others, whereas HSMs do not have this preference, and receive behavioural cues from everyone, including non-similar others, which further supports the previous claim that they are more prone to conform.

In another study conducted on SM, Klein, Snyder, and Livingston (2004) had participants respond to the Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder, 1974), and the Heterosexuals' Attitude towards Homosexuality survey (Larsen, Reed, & Hoffman, 1980). Participants were brought back into the lab and expressed their attitudes towards homosexual individuals. Two-thirds of the participants were then told that they would discuss their attitudes with either people with positive attitudes (for one-third) or with negative attitudes (for one-third) about the same topic. Therefore, participants were either in a discussion with a tolerant group, a prejudiced group, or no group at all. It was found that HSMs were significantly more prejudiced when the audience was prejudiced, whereas LSMs were not affected by the audience's attitude. This further shows the interesting interaction between SM and conformity, which is what the current research is attempting to extend. That is, the current study proposes to extend previous research by changing the scenario from a discussion group to a testing situation.

Similarly to SM, conformity has been vastly researched. At the forefront of this field was Solomon Asch's (1956) line judgment studies. In Asch (1956), participants compared the length of a target line with three other lines. Results showed that when confederates said that the target lines matched line A, for example, when clearly it matched the length of line B, participants conformed to the confederates' false responses at a significantly higher rate. These experiments set the groundwork for future conformity studies. Asch clearly demonstrated that people conform to others' opinions, even if there is strong evidence for them to be false.

Since then, a number of studies have been conducted on conformity.

Recent extensions into this literature have been examining how conformity has changed over time. Bond and Smith (1996) conducted a meta-analysis of 133 studies on conformity from different cultures to ascertain whether conformity has changed over time and how it differs from individualist cultures to collectivist ones. They found that conformity has decreased in the United States since the Asch (1956) studies were conducted. Furthermore, they found that collectivist countries (i.e. many countries in Asia) exhibited higher levels of conformity than individualist countries (i.e. countries in North America). Although this could lead to decreased conformity in the current study, a significant main effect of conformity is still predicted to exist, as many recent studies still detect a significant conformity effect induced by peer pressure (i.e., Pivik, 2010)

As illustrated, much research has been conducted on both SM and conformity. In a recent study (Pivik, 2010), SM was examined as one of the personality variables that influenced conformity. Half of the participants were given images to rate after either seeing the ratings of others (conformity condition) and the other half were not (nonconformity condition). Results showed that personality variables, including SM, had no effect on conformity. This is influential for the current research, due to the fact that the present study will also investigate conformity and SM. However, in the study conducted by Pivik (2010), the conformity conditions were induced online, whereas the current study will use confederates in a lab, which is expected to yield significant effects of SM on conformity, due to the physical presence of others.

Self-monitoring has also been investigated in terms of its correlation with conformity. Santee and Maslach (1982) tested this by having confederates provide solutions to 20 scenarios of problems in human relations. Participants' solutions could have been correct (or the better solution) and conformed to either the majority or the minority of confederates.

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Their solutions could have also been incorrect (or the poorer solution) and conformed to the minority of confederates. Finally, their solutions could have been an original solution not provided by the confederates. Santee and Maslach (1982) found that self-monitoring was the only personality variable studied (others included self-esteem and social anxiety) that did not correlate with conformity. One plausible explanation for the lack of correlation is the fact that participants were alone when responding, rather than in a group with the presence of others as they will be in the current study.

Thus the current study proposes to address an alternative explanation of the previous studies. That is, a person's level of SM does affect a person's willingness to conform, but the conformity has to be induced by physical presence.

For the purposes of this study, peer pressure will be manipulated by means of confederates leaving a testing room either very quickly ("leave early" condition) or not at all ("do not leave" condition) after the test is handed out. Conformity, as the dependent variable, will be measured by the amount of time it takes the participants to complete and subsequently hand in their test paper.

The current study will look at the differences between HSMs and LSMs with respect to how they conform to the behaviour of confederates in a test taking situation. There are two main hypotheses in this study. The first is that participants, regardless of their level of SM, will conform to the confederates' behaviour of either leaving the room early or not leaving at all. That is, participants will complete the test in a shorter amount of time when the confederates leave early and take longer when the confederates do not leave at all. The second hypothesis predicts that LSMs will conform to the confederates less extremely than HSMs. That is, LSMs will be less influenced to conform to the behaviour of the confederates and thus, will not hand in the test paper in as short or as long in time as HSMs, thus producing a significant interaction between the two independent variables.

More specifically, participants who are HSMs and in the "do not leave" condition will take the most amount of time of all the conditions to hand in their paper. Likewise, HSMs in the "leave early" condition will take the least amount of time to hand in their papers.

Method

Participants

Participants will be 80 undergraduate students taking Introduction to Psychology at Western University. There will be an equal number of males and females. The majority of the participants' ages will likely range from 18-20. Participants will be randomly assigned to either the "leave early" or "do not leave" condition. The study will have an equal number of participants in each of the four conditions. Participants will complete the study individually. However, there will always be confederates in the room creating the appearance that it is a group setting with other participants completing the same task as the real participant. In line with prior research, there will be seven confederates used to induce conformity (Asch, 1956). Participants will be compensated with course credit in return for their participation in this study.

Materials

In this study there will be two independent variables. The first will be the degree to which participants engage in SM, measured by the Self-Monitoring Scale (SMS; Snyder, 1974). The scale consists of 18 true or false items (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). Sample items include: "I find it hard to imitate the behavior of other people" and "In different situations and with different people, I often act like very different persons." Participants will be divided into HSM or LSM by performing a median split on the SM scores. 50% of participants above the median will be classified as HSMs, whereas 50% of participants below the median will be classified as LSMs.

The second independent variable will be the pressure that the confederates elicit from the participants. This will be done either by the confederates handing in their test papers and

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leaving the room quickly or not handing in the papers and not leaving at all. In the “leave early” condition, the seven confederates will leave in 15 second intervals starting two minutes after the test begins. The other required materials are one pencil and a set of math questions for each participant and confederate. There will be 50 math questions on the test. The questions will be of varying difficulty, ranging from simple addition and subtraction, to more complicated algebra questions (i.e. $8 + 9$ to $390/13 + 23/4$).

The dependent variable (conformity) will be measured by the amount of time it takes for the participant to hand in his or her paper from the time the test begins.

Procedure

Before participants come to the lab, they will have already been assigned an ID code and randomly assigned to either the “leave early” condition or the “do not leave” condition. The confederates will be told what they are supposed to do for each participant. When the participants enter the lab, they will be greeted by the experimenter and sat down in a room that emulates a school classroom (i.e. there will be desks and a chalkboard). Some confederates will already be seated prior to the participant arriving. A few confederates will arrive after the participant arrives so the participant does not think he or she is late. Two minutes after the arrival of the participant, the experimenter will tell the real participant that all the participants have now arrived and that they can now begin the study. The experimenter will give the confederates and the participant a letter of information to read and answer any questions they may have. After obtaining informed consent, the participant and confederates will complete the SMS.

Instructions will then be delivered by the experimenter in a clear and concise manner. The experimenter will explain that there will be a math test for everyone to complete, and that some questions may be easy while others might be difficult. Finally, the participant will be told that they are free to hand in the test and leave

whenever he or she feels that he or she has finished the test.

Shortly after the instructions, the experimenter will begin the test. A second experimenter watching from a second room will start a timer. In the “leave early” condition, the first confederate will hand in his or her paper and leave after 2 minutes. 15 seconds later, the second confederate will do the same. This trend will continue until all seven confederates have handed in their test papers. Once the participant hands in his or her paper, the second experimenter will stop the timer and record the amount of time it took for the participant to hand in his or her paper.

Before being debriefed, a manipulation check will be done in order to ensure that the time at which the confederates left induced sufficient conformity. Participants will be asked to what extent they felt pressure to finish the test at the same time as everyone else in the room, or leave the room when others began to leave. Their response options will be “I felt very pressured”, “I did not feel very pressured” and “I felt somewhat pressured”. The participant will also be asked when the first person finished the test and left the room, with response options being “quite early”, “quite late”, and “I didn’t notice”. The participant will then be debriefed and told that the other participants were confederates and used for the purposes of the study.

Results

For this study, one main effect and an interaction effect are to be expected. The main effect is the effect of confederates’ pressuring behaviour on conformity such that participants will be significantly influenced to leave the room more quickly or more slowly depending on the confederates’ behaviour. As seen in Figure 1, an interaction effect is also expected to occur such that the HSMs in the “do not leave” condition will take the longest to complete the test. Likewise, HSMs in the “leave early” condition will take the shortest amount of time. LSMs in the “do not leave” condition will take the second longest time, followed by LSMs in the “leave early” condition.

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Discussion

As previously discussed, if the hypotheses of this study are significantly supported, HSMs will take the longest amount of time to complete the test in the “do not leave” condition and take the shortest amount of time in the “leave early” condition. There are certainly implications that this study has on real life if the hypotheses were supported. One is that the structure of tests and exams could be looked into further. For example, students who are influenced by the behaviour of others may feel anxious and pressured to hand in their test when they see others doing so. Perhaps putting time limits on when students are allowed to hand in their exams could be used to reduce this feeling of pressure. Another implication is how large a role one’s level of SM plays in that individual’s social life. People who are high or low in SM act in different ways in varying types of social situations. This is beneficial for people to know about themselves and friends when making social decisions, such as groups of friends. It would be especially helpful if individuals knew their levels of SM to know how to behave, cues to take, etc.

This study also contains a number of limitations. First, participants’ math abilities could be a confounding variable. A participant who is not as proficient in math as another participant may take longer to complete the test for that reason. It is also possible that he or she would give up faster and hand in the test more quickly. Another limitation is that the manipulation to induce conformity might not be strong enough. The confederates who left early may not have left early enough to induce sufficient conformity.

When looking ahead to future research, there are a couple of aspects to consider. First, future research should look at other personality variables that may influence conformity (i.e. self-esteem) in a test taking situation. Furthermore, varying the number of confederates used as well as the number of questions on the test could affect conformity, so this should be investigated as well. Finally, future research could also attempt to replicate the findings of Snyder et al. (1983) by

manipulating the similarity of other test takers to see how HSMs and LSMs behave in comparison to similar and non-similar others (see Pivik, 2010; Santee & Maslach, 1982).

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Appendix

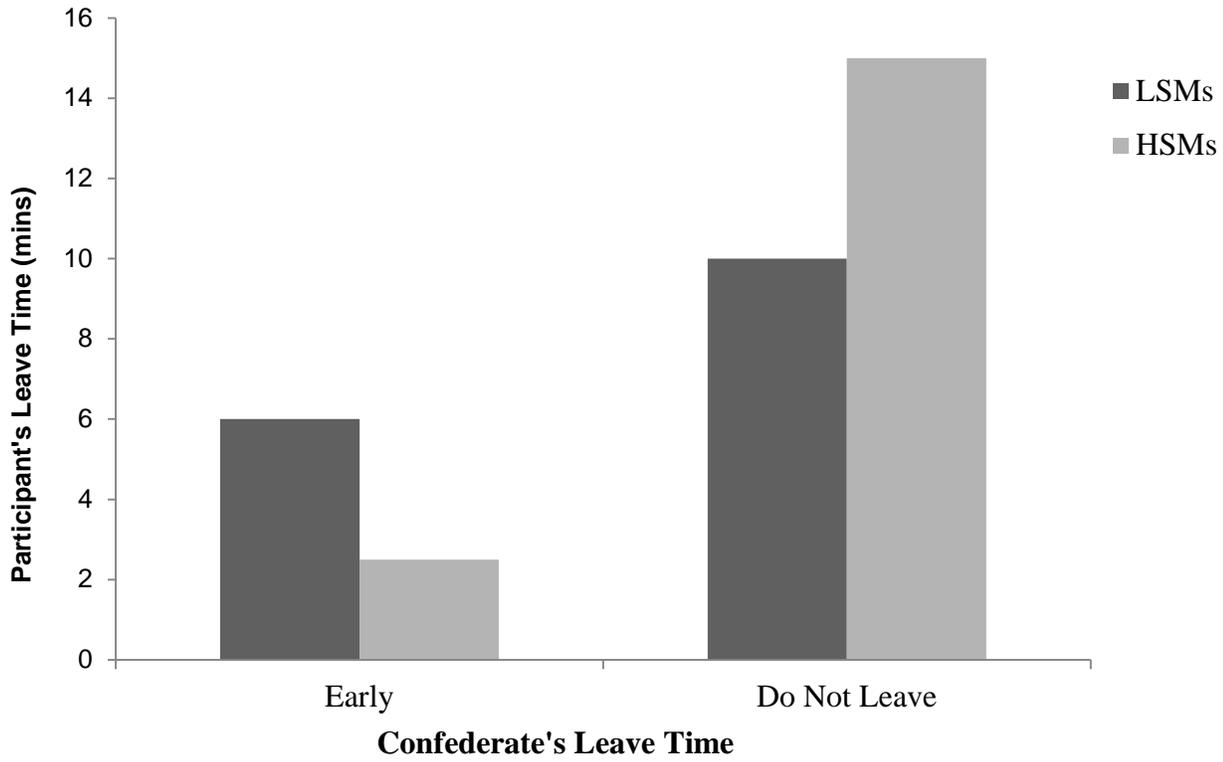


Figure 1. Expected time it will take for participants to hand in test paper as a function of time it takes for confederates to leave the room and level of participants' self-monitoring.