

Identity Implications of Conformity: Sex Differences in Normative and Attributional Judgments

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Based on situated identity theory, which postulates that behaviors are enacted in order to claim particular identities, it was hypothesized that differences in conformity rates for males and females are a function of sex differences in the identity implications of conformity. Identity implications of conformity were assessed in a simulation of a recent conformity experiment (Santee and Maslach, forthcoming). Observers indicated the relative values of identities available in the experimental situation (normative judgments) and made inferences about actors' identities based on information about their conformity behavior (attributional judgments). Factor analysis of observers' normative judgments revealed two evaluative dimensions: instrumentality and expressiveness. For both normative and attributional judgments, females judge conformity as a more positive, self-defining act. This finding explains the higher rates of conformity exhibited by females in the original conformity experiment and in a self-presentational simulation reported in the present study. Inconsistencies in research on sex differences in conformity may be understood by examining the identity implications of conformity in the context of various experimental paradigms.

Although most social scientists maintain that human behavior is controlled by the environment, they differ greatly in their conceptualizations of social control. Behavior has been said to be controlled by reinforcements (Skinner, 1953), incentives (Mischel, 1979), behavior setting programs (Wicker, 1979), roles and norms (Biddle and Thomas, 1966), and other factors that are understood to inhere in situations.

In contrast, sociologists who have taken seriously the conceptualizations of G. H. Mead and W. I. Thomas (Ball, 1972) maintain that behavior is under the control of the meanings that people bring to, and construct in, social situations. According to this perspective, when actors fail to establish and maintain consensus about the social meanings of situations, interaction is stymied (Goffman, 1959; McHugh, 1968) because the direction and organization of behavior depend on its current and anticipated meaning to those gathered together. In a setting, individuals will act in a fashion that helps to define the situation to self and to others.

The identities that actors claim for themselves and attribute to others in a situation are an important part of the meanings that must be defined. According to situated identity theory (cf. Alexander and Lauderdale, 1977), behav-

iors are enacted in order to claim particular identities. That is, behaviors are chosen because they define for others who we are, or at least how we would like to be identified in the situation.

It is generally assumed that actors intend to claim the most positive identities available in a situation. Also, it is assumed that actors agree on which identities are the more positive. We will use the term *normative judgments* to refer to evaluations of the relative value of identities available in a situation. For example, people may evaluate kindness more positively than efficiency in a given situation, such as dealing with someone who is emotionally upset. When normative consensus is absent, actors do not share an evaluative basis for assessing the meanings of behaviors, and so their behavior patterns differ.

To date, tests of situated identity theory have not measured normative judgments about the value of potential situated identities. Instead, emphasis has been given to a second but distinctly different type of judgment, namely attribution (e.g., Alexander and Lauderdale, 1977). *Attributional judgments* refer to inferences made about actors' identities based on their behaviors. Attributional dissensus obtains when actors disagree about the implications of a particular act for identity claims. Here the issue is how to interpret an act in terms of relevant identities, whereas normative judgments are evaluations of the desirability of the identities themselves.

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Both normative and attributional judgments are important aspects of the situational social structure that serves to control behavior. In the present study, normative and attributional judgments are assessed and linked to the response patterns in a previous experiment—on conformity and dissent (Santee and Maslach, forthcoming). In that experiment, there was a significant difference in males' and females' rates of conformity. Although this and other studies have demonstrated sex differences in conformity, the evidence is not at all consistent nor substantive (Sohn, 1980). Still, when there are significant sex differences in conformity experiments, in virtually all cases females conform more than males (Eagly, 1978).

The analysis of situated identity theory presented above suggests that conformity experiments may create situations in which males and females disagree in their attributional judgments about acts of conformity. Conformity may lead to stronger, more certain identity inferences for females than for males. Further, greater conformity by females may be due to the fact that the identities implied by conformity are themselves evaluated more positively by females than males.' Thus, we predict that females, in comparison to males, make both attributional and normative identity judgments about conformity that lead to its more frequent enactment.

METHOD

One hundred thirty-three undergraduates participated in the study for course credit. Participants, who were to act as observers of a simulation of the original conformity experiment (Santee and Maslach, forthcoming), arrived in groups of 10 to 20 at the social psychology laboratory where the study was recreated for them. In that experiment, subjects in groups of four males or four females were placed in isolation booths and were presented with 20 stories about problems that arise in everyday life. Associated with each problem were three solutions. Subjects were to choose among the three solutions or they could dissent by giving a creative, unique solution of their own. Subjects were led to believe that they heard, over their headsets, the answers of the other three subjects. In fact all subjects gave their answers simultaneously after hearing a tape recording on which three confederates picked among the three solutions.

For the simulation, transcripts were devised to reflect one of five levels of conformity with the opinions of the majority on the various stories: agreement on 0, 6, 12, 16, and 18 trials. The tape recording from the original experiment contained instructions to subjects, a nar-

ration of the 20' stories, and responses given by the confederates. After hearing this tape recording, observers made normative and attributional judgments. For these rating tasks, 25 trait adjectives were drawn from those used in the Alexander and Lauderdale (1977) study of social influence. Two response formats were used: to make normative judgments, observers used a 7-point scale ranging from "good" (7) to "bad" (1) to evaluate how desirable each characteristic would be in the experimental situation that had been recreated for them; to make attributional judgments, they indicated "how likely (7) or unlikely (1) it is that the person whose transcript you have seen is the type of person" who is honest, secure, sincere, etc.

An additional 40 undergraduates participated in a second part of the simulation. The conformity situation was recreated for these students and they were told to respond in a fashion that made the best possible impression. If sex differences in conformity are due to normative and attributional implications, rates of conformity for males and females should be even more discrepant in this self-presentational simulation than in the original experiment, given the emphasis here on claiming a positive identity.

RESULTS

Before examining the normative and attributional judgments, sex differences in rates of conformity produced in the original experiment (Santee and Maslach, forthcoming) and in the self-presentational simulation are examined. Conformity was measured as the number of trials on which subjects agreed with the response of the majority of confederates. As can be seen in Table 1, females in the original experiment conformed more than did males ($t(81) = 2.01, p < .05$).

In the simulation of that experiment, with self-presentational focus made salient, the sex difference in conformity was replicated, with females conforming more ($t(38) = 2.76, p < .01$). Thus, conformity appears to have differential identity implications for males and females.

Table 1. Conformity in the Original Experiment and its Simulation

	Original Experiment		Simulation	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Conformity*	10.7	11.9*	10.8	14.0**

Mean number of trials on which subjects agreed with the response of the majority.

* $t(81) = 2.01, p < .05$.

** $t(38) = 2.76, p < .01$.

Our analysis of situated identity theory suggests that these differences may be due to differences in the normative and/or attributional judgments made by males and females. To test whether differences in behavior arise out of differences in normative judgments, the evaluative (good-bad) ratings of the 25 identities were subjected to a principal factor analysis with varimax rotation. A two-factor solution appeared the simplest, accounting for 37% of the variance in the ratings. The first factor consisted of ten items with loadings of .45 or greater. These items reflect the observer's instrumental concerns: honest, secure, independent, mature, sincere, self-confident, rational, logical, realistic, and fair. The second factor comprised seven items reflecting concern about expressiveness: likable, friendly, modest, considerate, dependable, agreeable, and kind. Separate factor analyses of responses from male and female observers replicated this basic two-factor pattern of loadings. Thus, males and females are similar in the patterning of their normative judgments regarding the expression of these identities in this conformity situation.

While the two normative dimensions are similar for males and females, we predicted that females would make more positive normative judgments, which would parallel their elevated conformity rate. To test this prediction, the items loading on the two factors were combined to create two indices (Cronbach's alpha = .87 for instrumentality and .84 for expressiveness). A 2 (sex of observer) x 2 (sex of target subject) x 5 (level of subject's conformity) ANOVA was conducted on each index. As expected, observers' evaluations of instrumentality and expressiveness were invariant across levels of conformity and across sex of target subject. In addition, there were no differences in the evaluations of expressiveness made by male and female observers. However, male and female observers differed in their evaluation of the instrumental identities ($F(1,113) = 4.89, p < .05$). Females evaluated instrumentality more positively than did males, although substantively this sex difference is quite small ($\eta^2 = .04$).

Attributional judgments are a second potential contributor to the differing conformity rates for males and females. The likelihood ratings on the ten instrumental identities and on the seven expressive identities were combined to create two indices, reflecting the observers' attributions about the subject in each of the five conformity conditions. A 2 (sex of observer) x 2 (sex of target subject) x 5 (level of conformity) ANOVA was conducted on the two attributional indices. For expressiveness, there was one significant main effect and no

interactions: attributions of expressiveness were affected only by level of conformity ($F(4,112) = 3.08, p < .05; \eta^2 = .08$). Subjects whose responses reflected higher levels of conformity were rated by observers as more likely to possess expressive identities.

For instrumentality, the observers' sex interacted with the subject's level of conformity ($F(4,112) = 3.42, p < .05$). Female observers attributed greater instrumentality to subjects who conformed, paralleling their attributions of expressive identities ($F(4,52) = 3.02, p < .05$). However, for male observers the pattern was reversed, with less instrumentality attributed to subjects who conformed ($F(4,71) = 2.33, p < .10$). These results are summarized in Table 2. Disagreement in attributional judgments made by males and females is greatest for subjects who consistently dissented (level 1: $t(22) = 3.57, p < .01$), with male observers defining dissenters as, for example, more honest, secure, and mature.

DISCUSSION

That there are sex differences in judgments about situated identity in conformity experiments is clearly established by the present study. This is true in two senses. First, in comparison to female observers, males were stronger in their attributions of instrumentality to subjects who dissented from the majority's position. In contrast, females tended to link instrumentality to conforming behavior. Second, females also evaluated instrumental identities more positively than did males. Thus, in both their normative and attributional judgments, females assess conformity as a more positive, self-defining act than do males.

This study highlights two important issues that have been ignored in previous research on situated action. First, past research has not

Table 2. Attributions of Instrumentality and Expressiveness for Five Levels of Conformity

	Conformity Condition				
	Low 1	2	3	4	High 5
Expressiveness	4.5 (24)	4.8 (26)	4.8 (25)	5.0 (30)	5.2 (28)
Instrumentality					
Male	5.5	5.3	4.8	5.0	4.8
Observers	(13)	(14)	(14)	(19)	(16)
Female	4.5	5.4	5.3	5.4	5.5
Observers	(11)	(12)	(11)	(11)	(12)

Note: Attributions of instrumentality and expressiveness range from 1 to 7, with high scores indicating the likelihood of the attribute. Values in parentheses are cell sizes.

examined conditions under which subjects generally agree about the attributional implications of a situated act. The present study demonstrated the importance of taking into account dissensus among subjects with respect to the attributional implications of conformity. Ignoring sex differences would have resulted in failure to reject the null hypothesis relating conformity to the attribute of instrumentality, since it was the interactional term and not the main effect that was significant.

Second, identity attributions made to subjects who have engaged in situated acts have been confused with evaluations of the desirability of situated identities, at least in terms of measurement operations. Evaluation of the desirability of identities, such as instrumentality, is part of a definition of the situation, whereas attribution is inference from a situated behavior (e.g., conformity) to an identity (e.g., expressiveness).

Although the distinction between situational definition and attributions to a particular actor in the situation has been noted (e.g., Alexander and Lauderdale, 1977), no attempt has been made previously to measure each construct separately. This is unfortunate since, as demonstrated here, normative and attributional judgments can be affected in different ways by the experimental setting. In contrast to the tradition of laboratory experiments on conformity, field studies of conformity (e.g., Santee and VanDerPol, 1976) have made the important distinction between the desirability of acts (normative expectations) on the one hand, and the behavior of particular actors and concomitant attributions on the other.

Attending to the distinction between attribution and evaluations of identities may provide insights that help to clarify the inconsistencies found in the conformity literature. Reviewers (e.g., Eagly, 1978) have found that in the majority of studies there are no sex differences in conformity rates, but that when there are differences it is nearly always the females who conform more. The inconsistency of the evidence linking sex to conformity may be due to differences in normative definitions of the experimental situation. The conformity situation examined in the present study was defined by females in terms of two pro-conformity identity dimensions. For them, both instrumentality and expressiveness were manifested by higher levels of conformity. For males, however, the situation implied identity conflict, with dissent as a claim for instrumentality and conformity a claim for expressiveness. Had the paradigm been constructed differently, the desirability of instrumentality might have been attenuated or the linkage between dissent and instrumentality might have been cut. The attractiveness of

conformity would then be equalized for the sexes. Alternatively, reinforcing differences in the ways males and females define the experimental situation might have enhanced the relationship between sex and conformity.

In this conformity experiment males are caught in an attributional conflict, reflected in Table 2, in which they must attempt to optimize the identity implications of their behavior by conforming neither too much nor too little. In both the original experiment (Santee and Maslach, forthcoming) and in the self-presentational simulation, males optimized their situated identity by conforming a moderate amount (10.7 and 10.8, respectively, or slightly more than half of the trials). Females judge conformity as positive on both identity dimensions, so for them the attributional implications of conformity are uniformly positive. Consequently, females conformed a greater amount than did males, both in the original experiment and especially in the self-presentational simulation where the importance of identity management was quite salient (11.9 and 14.0, respectively; see Table 1).

Considerable attention has been paid to the question of differences in male and female responsiveness to social influence (Eagly, 1978). Instead of asking whether females or males conform more, one might ask about the processes that underlie sex differences, or the lack of them, in conformity research. For example, why is it that in face-to-face situations females are somewhat more likely to conform than males? Our findings suggest that females may define these situations as ones where conformity is more desirable than dissent. In contrast, for males in the same situations, conformity may have both positive and negative identity implications. Thus, differences sometimes found in male and female rates of conformity may be a function of small differences in normative and attributional judgments such as those found in the present study. Future research should be directed at a more complete understanding of the attributional implications of various acts that are available to subjects in conformity experiments. From the present study it is clear that there are evaluative processes that explain behavioral differences not only between experimental conditions but within experimental conditions as well.

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