

Conforming to Failure

By Brooke Weber

The room is ordinary, I assume, for a 1970's classroom. It would be ordinary enough in this decade, with plain white walls, a chalkboard, a long table, and the nubby blue carpet of Academia. At the table six young men focus on a speaker with a professional mustache. He tells them that the experiment they are taking part in today involves the perception of the length of lines, and explains that all they must do is match the line on the left to the line of the same length on the right—a manageable enough task, as the lines that are not equal are of quite unlike lengths indeed. However there is a twist in the situation—only the student seated in the fifth chair is a test subject. The rest of the students are complicit with the examiner, and, when asked which lines are of equal length, respond uniformly with the wrong answer. Hearing everyone give answers that are so obviously different than his own, the young test subject begins to feel cold fingers of doubt tapping at his mind. “Well they can't all be wrong”, he might think to himself, or, “I know they're wrong, but I don't want to be the one to rock the boat.” And 75% of the time the subject will conform to the majority, giving the wrong answer at least once.

Originally implemented back in 1951 by Solomon Asch, this experiment has become a staple in social psychology. Asch concludes disturbingly: “The tendency to conformity in our society is so strong that reasonably intelligent and well-meaning young people are willing to call white black.” The Asch Paradigm represents normative conformity, a response to the influence of an overwhelming contradictory majority, i.e. peer pressure. Another type of conformity is informational conformity, which is when a person conforms in the face of a better argument or better set of facts. These two types of conformity are not mutually exclusive; as may be seen in instances of group-think, both peer pressure and the merit of an argument may affect the final

decision. Asch asserts that the problem with conformity is not that they may ally to harmful, or evil, beliefs; the problem with conformity is that people stop thinking for themselves, and following through, can stop thinking completely.

In the contentious modern world, there are many times that it would be convenient and satisfying to waive the traditional ethics of unbiased, balanced scientific journalism, and to be able to report the opinion of the majority as facts. For example, if we were able to reference only the scientific community's majority opinion on Global Warming, and not give column inches to dissenters, we could concentrate our attention on doing something about the problem instead of converting and raising awareness. If we were able to speak of evolution and the Sixth Extinction, in the mass media, and suppress the ever-threatening errors of eugenics, we could present a clear notion of the truth to the public. However there could be unseen sides to these issues, apart from accepted fact. Convenience is dangerous; the majority has been wrong all too frequently before.

For example, from a contemporary perspective it is bizarre to think of uranium and other radioactive materials benign. However, until recently, yellow cake has been considered a wonderful source of energy for the future. "Workers Handle 'Yellow Cake' Like Flour—It's Not Dangerous", reports a 1954 caption in *The National Geographic Magazine*. In an earlier age uranium was used as a dye, for coloring pottery, glassware, and false teeth. From the 1920's through the late 1950's radiation technology was used even to check if people's shoes were the right size. It wasn't until 1957 that nuclear fallout was declared hazardous by the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation, and it took even longer, until 1967, for milder x radiation to be recognized for its carcinogenic capabilities. The modernist fascination with new technologies and science led scientists to look so strongly on the future that the consequences of experimentation were largely forgotten.

It is not only the individual, or the lay public that may be blinded by enthusiasm and the pressures of conformity. Persons in positions of authority often conform to normative pressures. In 1992 the enactment of the Prescription Drug User Fee Act put the FDA on the payroll of the pharmaceutical industry. By the mid 1990's, the user fees paid by the pharmaceutical corporations to expedite approval of drugs comprised half the budget for the FDA's center for the evaluation of drugs. The diabetes drug Rezulin is a recent example of individuals in a federal agency bowing against their own judgment to normative pressures.

In 1996, Warner Lambert promoted Rezulin, a new blockbuster drug on Wall Street, promising huge profits for investors. Rezulin was reviewed by the FDA and approved, despite a recommendation to reject the drug by Dr. John L. Gueriguian, veteran agency medical officer, who cited its potential danger to the heart and liver. Gueriguian was stripped of his role after the drug's manufacturer complained of impertinent language. It's interesting to note that in 1997 in Britain Warner-Lambert's drug was taken off the market because it caused liver failure. In the United States it wasn't until 2000, three years after Rezulin was released on the market, that it was withdrawn. During its circulation Rezulin resulted in 90 liver failures, 63 deaths and seven non-fatal liver transplants. In response to the withdrawal Gueriguian said, "It is the right thing to do, but it is too late, too many people have already died and suffered."

One of the biases that may influence the average human is ethnocentrism. A person tends to assume that the moral norms for her culture are universal. Yet in a world of almost seven billion people it is unlikely that there is a consensus on any ethical topic and it is unreasonable to expect that all the world's opinions might even be documented. Some may say that it is not important to get everyone's opinion, as long as you get the specific people that matter, and yet that may exclude some important ideas and ideals. An example of the cultural standard in

conflict with the dominant Western ideal is the subject of spirit children of Ghana. Spirit children are children that are born with disabilities and deformities, or who are born into families suffering from starvation or a period of hard times. They are believed to have one of the dangerous spirits of the forest living in them. Traditionally a concoctions man is brought in to assess the situation of the child and family, and if he decides that the child is indeed a spirit child, it will be given a drink of poisonous herbs, and exposed in the forest to die. From the traditional Western viewpoint this is an awful practice, barbaric, and backwards. However, from a more culturally relativistic standpoint, it is a survival mechanism in a difficult landscape. Children of disability require a lot of care, and many will require care for their entire lives. A high maintenance child might prove the downfall for the entire family, if too much effort must be used in keeping it alive. Rather than killing a human child, affected families are only removing bad luck and bad spirits from their house.

In the light of evidence from the present and past, now is a time in which we particularly must not lose our objectivity. The more concerns and controversies that are found, the more all sides need to be evidenced, the more people need to be able to think. Not only are authorities frequently wrong, they are also subject to corruption and simple error—the FDA became corrupt under the influence of commercial pharmaceutical money, and the U.S. government was naïve in their assumption of the safety of low-dose radiation. A conformist scientific literature would silence or erase dissenting opinion, even in the face of rising evidence that the dominant opinion was wrong. Dissent is not only our right, given to us in the First Amendment of the constitution; it is an essential part of seeking the truth.

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