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# COMMUNICATION SKILLS

## What Does the Pain of Independence Have to Do With It?

By Doreen Stern, Ph.D.

I consider myself a straight shooter. Firm handshake. Excellent eye contact. Big smile. And like a Girl Scout, I tell the truth. Yet these facts are incontrovertible:

- I once nodded my head when my boss asked if I could have an important project done by Friday, even though I knew it was improbable.
- Without a word of dissent, I married a man who tore up my wedding vows four days before the ceremony.
- After my father told me when I was five to never let anyone know that my mother died when I was a baby, I never revealed to my stepsister that we had different mothers, even though we slept fewer than five feet away from each other in twin beds.

Am I an anomaly? Or do incidences like these, where one says or does something to conform to the views and dictums of others, befall other people?

Research suggests I am not alone. What can explain it? And what might help us counteract the social pressure we feel to conform?

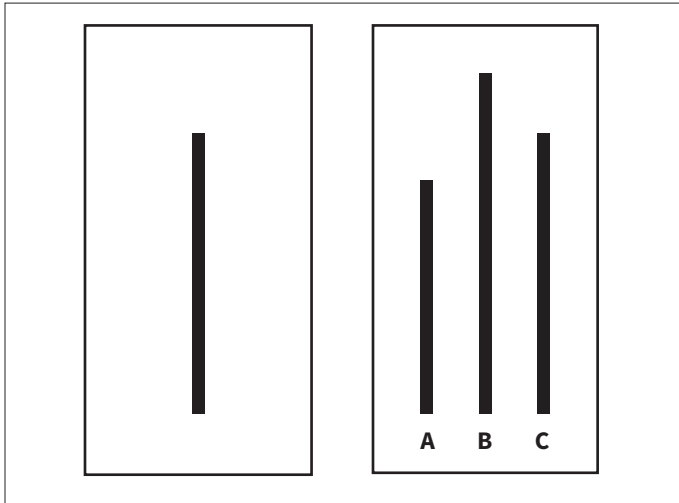
### WHAT RESEARCH HAS BEEN CONDUCTED CONCERNING THIS PHENOMENON?

In 1951, professor Solomon Asch of Swarthmore College conducted an experiment to investigate the degree to which social pressure could cause a person to conform to the opinions of a majority group. Fifty male Swarthmore students were recruited to participate in a “vision test.” One student at a time was grouped with seven other male students of the same age and racial makeup. Students wore similar attire and sat facing an experimenter at the front of the room. Unbeknownst to the selected student, the other seven were confederates of the experimenter (i.e., actors). They had been instructed to provide wrong answers after the first two rounds to see how their erroneous replies would affect the selected student.<sup>1</sup>

“This is a test to evaluate visual acuity,” the experimenter said, showing a card with a vertical line on it. “There will be another card, with three other vertical lines on it. One of them will be the same length as the one on the first card. Another line will be longer and another shorter. You will be asked to say which of these three lines matches the first one: A, B, or C.”<sup>2</sup> (See Figure 1.)



Figure 1  
1951 Asch Conformity Experiment



Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asch\\_conformity\\_experiments](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asch_conformity_experiments). This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International, 3.0 Unported, 2.5 Generic, 2.0 Generic and 1.0 Generic license.

A near-100 percent correct responding rate was expected of each selected student. And in the control group, where there was no pressure to conform to confederates' replies, the error rate was less than 1 percent.<sup>3</sup>

*Although the selected students answered correctly when the experimenter's confederates replied correctly, 35 percent of the time when the confederates provided the wrong answer prior to theirs, the selected student went along with that incorrect choice. Some continued to do so even when the difference in line lengths deviated by as much as 7 inches. Further, 75 percent of all selected students matched the wrong answer at least once during the 18 trials.<sup>4</sup>*

Of note, when the selected student wrote his answer on a piece of paper, rather than replying aloud, conformity decreased. *Likewise, when another student provided the correct answer before the selected student's turn, the selected student did so, too.<sup>5</sup>*

#### WHAT COULD HAVE CAUSED THE PARTICIPANTS TO CONFORM SO READILY?

Although Asch raised the possibility in 1952 that the observed conformity might be the result of altered perceptions,<sup>6</sup> responses offered by the selected students contradicted that explanation. Indeed, when the purpose of the study was revealed to them (individually) after the experiment, *most of the participants said they did not really believe their conforming answers, but had gone along with the group for fear of being ridiculed or thought "peculiar."<sup>7</sup>*

"That we have found the tendency to conformity in our society so strong that reasonably intelligent and well-meaning young people are willing to call white black is a matter of concern. It raises questions about our ways of education and about the values that guide our conduct," wrote Asch, in 1955, after the Swarthmore findings were replicated at two other colleges.<sup>8</sup>

#### TECHNOLOGY TO THE RESCUE

For decades, psychologists puzzled over why humans were so prone to conform. "What was going on in the minds of the kowtowers in Asch's experiment?" they wanted to know. In 2005, Dr. Gregory Berns, distinguished professor of neuroeconomics at Emory University, designed an experiment to find out. He brought functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to bear on the problem.<sup>9</sup>

Berns and his team recruited 32 volunteers, men and women between 19 and 41, with a mean age of 26. The volunteers played a game in which each was shown two three-dimensional objects on a computer screen and asked to decide if the first object could be rotated to match the second.

Initially, the volunteers played the game independently; in this scenario, *they gave the incorrect answer only 13.8 percent of the time.* They then played the game against a group, similar to Asch's 1951 experiment, only this time participants were presented with the responses of four peers who were actors giving wrong answers half of the time. *When playing against this group, the participant provided wrong answers 41 percent of the time.<sup>10</sup> This statistic is strikingly similar to the results of Asch's study.*

This time, though, Berns and his team had the resources to peer into the brain of each volunteer. Berns wanted to know, as Asch had, whether participants conformed knowing the group was wrong, as the responses of the 1951 participants indicated (after the purpose of the experiment was explained to them). Or had their perceptions been altered by the group?<sup>11</sup>

Berns and his team reasoned that if participants knew the group was *wrong*, the fMRI would reveal more brain activity in the decision-making prefrontal cortex (behind their foreheads). That is, the brain scanners would pick up the volunteers *consciously deciding to abandon their beliefs* in order to fit in with the group. That wasn't the case, though.<sup>12</sup>

Rather, the brain scans showed heightened activity in regions associated with visual and spatial perception (occipital and parietal regions, at the back of the brain). *Berns suggests this indicates the opinions of the group managed to change individual perceptions,<sup>13</sup> in what can irreverently be called a "mind-altering manner."*



#### WHAT ELSE DID THE BRAIN SCANS REVEAL?

A surprising condition was discovered in the brains of participants who didn't conform to the wrong answers provided by the actors: heightened activation in the amygdala.<sup>14</sup>

I liken our amygdalae to a local fire station. Sensory data stream in continuously from our eyes, ears, nose, mouth, lips, tongue, skin, hands, fingertips, stomach and even from the soles of our feet. Everything hums along nicely (think of your refrigerator here) *until a threat is detected*. RARRRRRR, the amygdalae scream, roaring into action. They communicate with our body through our nervous system, prompting the release of hormones and neurotransmitters to aid in our fight-or-flight response, potentially saving our lives.<sup>15</sup> Hence, it appears that our brains consider lack of conformity dangerous.

#### WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT THIS?

I suggest that we experience similar reactions to the ones described earlier when interacting with those integral to our well-being, such as bosses, spouses and parents. Accordingly, here are three actions I recommend, which I've recently undertaken to defuse the danger I sometimes feel:

1. **Get a buddy.** "If I'm going to do something my brain considers dangerous, like write a book, I want someone who has my back," I told myself. "How can one find a buddy?" you may ask. I put an ad in *The New York Review of Books*. It read: "BOOK BUDDY WANTED. Do you yearn to finish an important project? Let's help each other." I included my email address. The ad cost \$82 and I received only one reply,

yet the person who answered works in the same city as the one in which I live, directs a research center and is a psychiatrist. *That's a pretty good fit, since I'm writing about learning to tell the truth.*

2. **Train your brain to ignore the expectations of others.** Here's an easy way to start: The next time someone casually asks how you are, pause for a second to consider how you *truly* feel. Then, instead of muttering "fine," use a descriptive adjective to reply. And if you're feeling crummy, by all means say so.
3. **Think about what you *actually* desire, rather than go through the year putting one foot in front of the other.** In that vein, author, artist and inspiration coach Julia Cameron suggests starting a creativity notebook, where you list *10* things you want in seven categories (health, possessions, leisure, relationships, creativity, career and spirituality). "All right," Cameron admits. "It's a lot. Let yourself dream a little."<sup>16</sup>

Here's to dreaming, rather than fearing. ■



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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qA-gbpt7Ts8>. Retrieved Dec. 27, 2016.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asch\\_conformity\\_experiments](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asch_conformity_experiments). Retrieved Dec. 27, 2016.
- 4 <http://www.simplypsychology.org/asch-conformity.html>. Retrieved Dec. 26, 2016.
- 5 *Supra*, note 3.
- 6 <http://www.ccnl.emory.edu/greg/Berns%20Conformity%20Biol%20Psych%20Final%20with%20Figs%20and%20Suppl%20Materials.pdf>. Retrieved Dec. 27, 2016.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 [http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Solomon\\_Asch](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Solomon_Asch). Retrieved Dec. 26, 2016.
- 9 S. Cain. (2012). *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Supra*, note 6.
- 15 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/i-got-mind-tell-you/201508/the-amygdala-is-not-the-brains-fear-center>. Retrieved Dec. 27, 2016.
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