

## Why do we conform?

In 1951, Solomon Ash conducted one of the most famous experiments in the history of psychology. He had participants watch confederates judging the length of a line, often obviously incorrect. And yet, when requested to make the judgment themselves thereafter, almost all participants went along with the wrong judgment at least sometimes. When interviewed afterwards, most of the participants admitted that they had not really believed in the (confederate-biased) answers they gave. This led Asch to the conclusion that this conformity effect reflected the belief in the superior knowledge of the group.

Since that time great number of the experiments in the social psychology have demonstrated the conformity effect: when faced with the opinion (or action) that deviates from one's own initial opinion (or action) people tend to adjust their initial judgements in the direction of the "group's" opinion. Social psychologists have explained this phenomenon by various social theories: belief in the superior knowledge of the group, desire to belong to the group, etc. However, a recent study of Kim and Hommel (2015) suggests that there might be a more basic mechanism that underlies conformity behavior. It has been suggested that our brain codes the world events (including actions, experiences, etc.) as a combination of features that belong to this event. So each event is represented in our brain by various codes connected together like in a puzzle. It really does not matter for the brain whether you are the main actor of this event or you just watch someone producing an action, it would still code it in terms of its features (puzzle pieces) tied to each other. And if later you come across some separate features of this event (parts of the puzzle) your brain will try to restore the whole event based on these few features (complete the puzzle). If two events share many similar features, your brain may find it difficult to differentiate between these two event properly. For example, if you watch someone play tennis or play tennis yourself, these events will get stored in your brain as a combination of their features (racket, court, balls, etc.). The more the game you watch looks like your game (player, racket, manner of play, court), the more features these two event will share. So later you might have difficulties remembering properly which game you played yourself and which one you watched someone else playing, unless there were some outstanding features in one of this events that defines it in a proper separate event file. It is therefore possible that conformity occurs simply because our brain cannot properly distinguish our own action from the observed one and when we are requested to remember our own action (opinion) we retrieve from our memory an action (opinion) that combines those two together.

In their experiment Kim and Hommel offered participants to judge the attractiveness of 220 female faces on a scale 1 (least attractive) to 8 (most attractive). After the participants made their judgement for each picture they saw a number. The participants were told in advance that the numbers they saw were random and had nothing to do with the attractiveness evaluation. The numbers were either higher, lower or equal to their evaluation. When the participants evaluated the attractiveness of the same faces again (20 minutes after they finished their 1<sup>st</sup> evaluation) they adjusted their initial ratings in the direction of the "random" number they saw for each picture. They conformed! But not to the group's opinion but to a random number they saw! And the effect

was as strong as the original “conforming with the group” effect.

This study suggests that at least some complex social behaviors can be explained by basic cognitive mechanisms. Maybe we conform not because we want to belong to the group, and not even because we believe that the group knows better, but simply because our brain does not distinguish us so strongly from the group.

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## **Publication**

[An event-based account of conformity.](#)

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