

Non-normative and pro-social conformity: A study of rural and urban differences

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ABSTRACT

Previous conformity research has examined situational and personal factors on levels of conformity. The current study treated rural and urban settings as reflective of cultural differences while examining non-normative and pro-social peer situations. Non-normative actions are those that do not reflect the norms of the system, but do not harm anyone. Pro-social behavior can be defined as any act that helps or is designated to help others, regardless of the helpers' motives. Sixty-five female freshmen were randomly assigned to a non-normative or pro-social condition. Participants were classified by their hometowns as rural (population of 2,500 or less) or urban (population of 50,000+). In the non-normative condition the participants were instructed to not talk to each other. However, confederates began talking after the experimenter left. In the pro-social condition, the participants heard a crash and a moan from the experimenter. Time to be pro-social (help) or time to break norms (talk) was measured. The number of people who demonstrated helping behavior did not vary significantly between rural and urban participants, and the number of people who talked did not differ significantly between rural and urban participants, and the number of people who talked did not differ significantly between rural and urban participants. In addition, the mean lengths for helping behavior were not significantly different between rural and urban participants. Similarly, in the non-normative condition, there was not a significant difference in the amount of time it took for participants to talk.

Conformity is a major aspect of our everyday social world; without it, it would be difficult for people to know what to expect. Although often portrayed as negative, the process of individuals' conformity to others or to social norms can be positive. For instance, not yelling in a library or stopping at stop signs are examples of positive conformity. However, conformity can also involve negative situations, such as a peer group pressuring one of their own to try smoking. The current study stems from a rich history of literature that has examined situational and personal factors on levels of conformity. Situational factors include aspects such as group size and majority opinion (Barnard, 1991; Williams & Taormina, 1993) while personal factors include characteristics such as, gender and religion (Carr, 1998; Musick, 2000). Additionally, norms of conformity vary by individuals and their cultures. For instance, conformity is higher in collective societies than in individualistic ones (Brehm & Kassin, 1996). In this proposed study we will treat rural and urban settings as reflective of cultural differences. We will examine non-normative and pro-social peer pressure situations as dependent upon rural and urban backgrounds.

Urban vs. Rural

Approximately 95% of our country's land is comprised of rural areas, although it is only inhabited by 25% of the population (Daniels, 1996). The most common definition of rural and urban areas is cited by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, which defines rural populations as those that consist of people who live in places or towns of less than 2,500 inhabitants and in open country outside the closely settled suburbs of metropolitan cities. In contrast, urban areas are comprised of cities with 50,000 or more people (Toomey & First, 1993). For purposes of consistency, we will also use this definition of rural and urban areas.

People who are originally from rural areas tend to have different personal characteristics than people who are from urban areas. First of all, urban areas have larger populations and are more likely to be exposed to many different cultures. When two or more cultures exist together, people tend to be allowed more individuality (Brehm & Kassin, 1996). Rural areas are more homogeneous, meaning that most of the people within the population share the same languages, religions, and social customs. Homogeneous societies tend to be less tolerant of those people who do not follow the norms set up by their society (Brehm & Kassin, 1996). In these areas, social institutions, such as schools and churches, work together with the families to encourage behavior that closely follows the given norms (Carlson, Lassey & Lassey, 1981). Due to their small size and limited social diversity compared to urban areas, rural residents may experience more pressure to conform than people from urban areas (Donnermeyer, 1995; Nease, 1993).

Similarly, in rural areas values change at a slower rate than they do in urban areas. Rural residents are more disposed to maintain existing views, and are more hesitant about change compared to their urban counterparts (Carlson, Lassey & Lassey, 1981). Individualistic and collectivistic cultures resemble urban and rural societies. Individualistic cultures and urban societies are similar because individualistic people value independence, autonomy, and self-reliance. In addition, their personal goals take priority in their lives. Collectivistic and rural societies are different from individualistic societies because they value interdependence, cooperation, and social harmony. These values are parallel to farm families because they have to cooperate and work together in order to run a successful farm, and farms are a major part of rural areas (Brehm & Kassin, 1996).

People from rural communities are more likely to live in extended families, and grandparents tend to live close to their children and grandchildren (Carlson, Lassey & Lassey, 1981). One study has shown that the social networks of persons living in rural settings tend to be more dense, smaller, and of longer duration than those of persons living in urban settings (Beggs, Haines, & Hurlbert, 1996). Due to the fact that rural residents have little opportunity to find other groups to serve as referents, they will be more likely to conform to the norms of their own group (Musick, 2000). As a result, people from rural areas are more likely to be influenced by personal relationships. Research also suggests that people from rural areas tend to maintain their original attitudes and behavior even when they move from a rural area to an urban area and vice versa. In fact, one's own place of origin is a better indicator of how one behaves than his or her present residence (Carlson, Lassey, & Lassey, 1981).

Types of Conformity

Another aspect of our study will examine the differences between non-normative and pro-social conformity. Non-normative actions are those that do not reflect the norms of the system (Foster & Matheson, 1994). For example, talking in a movie theatre would be going

against a norm. Pro-social conformity, also termed pro-social behavior, consists of actions benefiting others. Pro-social behavior can be defined as any act that helps or is designed to help others, regardless of the helpers' motives (Christensen & Fierst, 1998). One of the major recent findings of social psychology has been the discovery of more helpful behavior in rural versus urban settings (Yousif & Korte, 1995). Christensen & Fierst (1998) suggest that a greater pro-social response is likely in open, rural communities and a lower response in dense, urban communities. Furthermore, researchers have demonstrated that population density, not size is the greatest predictor of helping behavior (Levine, Martines, Brase, & Sorenson, 1994). Specifically, it has been proposed that urban unhelpfulness is restricted to spontaneous and informal types of helping (Amato, 1983) as well as limited to interactions with only neighbors and strangers (Korte, 1980). Our pro-social conformity situation will also involve only interactions with strangers in a spontaneous, informal setting. We believe this distinction between non-normative and pro-social conformity is worthy of examining, as comparisons between the two are rare, especially under similar experimental conditions.

The purpose of the current study is to look at the residential backgrounds of people to determine if cultural background is related to levels of conformity. Is there a difference between susceptibility to peer pressure and likeliness of exhibiting helping behavior in people from urban versus rural areas? Given rural people tend to follow the norms of society, and urban people are more accepting of individuality, we believe that college students originally from rural areas will exhibit a higher rate of conformity behavior to peer pressure than those students originally from urban areas in the non-normative condition. However, we expect lower conformity from rural participants in the pro-social condition given high norms for helping behavior in rural areas.

METHOD

Participants

Sixty-five first-year undergraduate students from an introductory psychology class were solicited and were given one point of extra credit for their participation. Participants were restricted to freshmen in their first semester of college. Only female participants were used because women are more likely to comply than males in order to preserve social harmony (Wiggins, Wiggins & Vander Zanden, 1994), and also adding gender as another independent variable would double the number of participants needed.

Materials

Participants signed up for ten-minute slots according to their rural (2,500 or less) or urban (50,000 or more) "hometown." Hometown was defined as the place where they most strongly identified with as growing up and in which they spent at least the last four years of K-12 schooling.

Procedure

This experiment required a total of four people to run, not including the participant. The four people included an experimenter, a debriefer, and two confederates who were compensated for their time. Two confederates were used to make the conformity situation more powerful and to set up a group atmosphere. In both conditions a personality test was administered as a distraction from the actual purpose of the experiment.

The participant walked into the classroom where two confederates were waiting. The experimenter greeted each participant and asked her to sign the informed consent form. Participants were randomly assigned to a non-normative group or pro-social conformity situ-

ation. In the non-normative situation, the experimenter informed the participants that it was extremely important to not talk to each other. The participants were also given instructions for the test before the experimenter left the room. During the four minutes in which the experimenter was not present, the confederates began talking to each other. They then attempted to start a conversation with the participant, asking them what they thought the interview would be about and other questions about their major, where they were from, etc. The experimenter returned after four minutes and collected the tests. The participants were led into the other room, debriefed about the true nature of the study, and were asked to fill out a short questionnaire on basic demographic information.

In the pro-social situation, participants were greeted and asked to sign the informed consent form the same way as the previous condition. They then entered the room where the two confederates were already seated. The experimenter gave instructions on the test and left the room for three minutes. As the experimenter walked out of the room, she “tripped” on a stool and boxes that were deliberately placed in hallway for the experiment. The experimenter moaned and acted as if she was hurt. The confederates both remained seated and recorded the amount of time it took participants to help or not help the “victim.” After three minutes, the experimenter returned, collected the tests, and led the participant to the debriefing room as in the previous condition.

RESULTS

Contrary to our hypotheses, rural participants did not demonstrate more helping behavior in comparison with urban participants. In addition, rural participants did not conform to the non-normative situation as compared to urban participants.

In the pro-social manipulation, where helping behavior was assessed, two intermediate behaviors, one participant who asked if the experimenter was okay and a participant who looked out the door, were coded as helping behavior. As shown in Table 1, the number of people who demonstrated helping behavior did not vary significantly between rural and urban participants, $\chi^2(1, N=34)=.02$, n.s. As shown in Table 2, in the non-normative condition, where we assessed conformity when given directions not to talk, the number of people who talked did not differ significantly between rural and urban participants, $\chi^2(1, N=31)=.19$, n.s.

Table 1. Number of participants who helped/ not helped.

Pro-social	Help	No Help
Rural	33%	67%
Urban	31%	69%

Table 2. Number of participants who talked/ not talked.

Non-normative	Talk	No Talk
Rural	58%	42%
Urban	50%	50%

As shown in Table 3, the mean lengths for both conditions were compared using a two-tailed independent t-test. The mean lengths for helping behavior were not significantly different between rural and urban participants, $t(15) = -.36, p < .05$. Similarly, in the non-normative condition, there was not a significant difference in the amount of time it took for participants to talk, $t(15) = -.115, p < .05$.

Table 3. Mean length to help or talk for participants who were pro-social or non-normative.

<u>Pro-social</u>	<u>Mean Length</u>	
(N=34)	<u>Rural</u>	.11
	<u>Urban</u>	.13
<u>Non-normative</u>		
(N=31)	<u>Rural</u>	1.9
	<u>Urban</u>	1.4

DISCUSSION

Our hypothesis regarding non-normative conformity stated that college students from rural areas would exhibit a higher rate of conformity than those from urban areas. However, in the pro-social condition, we expected lower conformity from the rural participants given high norms for helping behavior in rural areas. In other words, the urban college students were expected to show lower rates of conformity in the non-normative condition and higher rates in the pro-social situation. As shown in the results section, our hypotheses were not supported.

It is possible that the college students in this study feel more of a connection to their present residence than to their hometown. However, this would be contrary to previous research that one's own place of origin is a better indicator of how one behaves than his or her present residence (Carlson, Lassey, & Lassey, 1981). As in much social psychological research, the participants tended to be heavily influenced by the confederates' actions. This reliance on confederates supports the general theory that peer members are very influential to one another (Williams & Taormina, 1993), and suggests that the more acute demands of the situation and the model of the confederate may have outweighed more chronic socialization from their hometowns. It does appear from the surveys distributed in the debriefing sessions, that the conditions were realistic to the participants.

There are two methodological factors that may have contributed to our results. First, the fact that we had fewer participants than anticipated may have led us to a hypothesis that was not supported. A sample size of eighty participants was originally chosen to achieve adequate power (Wilson & Morgan, 2001). However, the strong similarity in the percentages of participants who conformed to the confederate would undermine that argument. Secondly, during the debriefing process, participants were asked not to discuss the details of the experiment with others. However, we were informed that there was at least one participant who was knowledgeable about the experiment.

Even with these contributing factors, it is possible that there is not a relationship between the variables of hometown size and conformity. Due to the lack of past research and theories connecting these two variables, we cannot be sure that they are related. Future research should consider using a greater number of participants that may be more representative of the

general population. In addition, older participants that will have been influenced longer by their hometowns should be used. Older persons are more likely to have lived in their hometown for a longer period of time. Therefore, they have a greater tendency to display characteristics typical of their hometown. Also, college students who are on their own for the first time may be likely to disengage from their hometown roots in an effort to exert their independence. Furthermore, it would be advantageous to have the experiment take place in a natural environment that is free from possible interruptions that may introduce extraneous variables. Distractions, such as people walking by or loud noises, may have an effect on the behavior of the participants. For example, people walking by may lead the participants to think that someone else was helping the experimenter during the pro-social condition.

Given the vital role that conformity plays in societies by helping to regulate both positive and negative behaviors, future research on the role of town size and culture on conformity should be of interest to researchers and social commentators.

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