

The Impact of Peer Conformity on Rule-breaking Behaviors among Adolescents in the School

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Abstract. Conformity pervasively exists among adolescent groups and frequently induces delinquency. This article, through a literature review, explores the psychological mechanism by which adolescents violate school rules due to peer conformity, and analyzes the correlation between this and social rule-breaking behaviors. Research indicates that conformity influences adolescents' choices through various way. Conformity can be classified to informative and normative conformity, while the inducing factors of them are dependent on situations, including identity conflicts, perceptions of rule legitimacy, peer pressure, and family dynamics. Conformity promotes positive behaviors or contributes to negative behaviors. The study also suggests that school rules, as microcosm of societal norms, significantly influence students' willingness to comply and the direction of conformity, particularly through the perceived rationality and fairness of sanctions. This paper recommends that schools guide conformity toward positive outcomes by enhancing the legitimacy of rules, providing emotional support, implementing positive behavior interventions, and offering continuous feedback. Such approaches can effectively reduce rule-breaking behavior.

Keywords: conformity, delinquency, school rules, peer pressure

1. Introduction

Conformity has been widely observed as a pervasive phenomenon in schools recently and often leads to a range of rule-breaking behaviors. These include imitating peers' fashion, participating in group teasing, cheating, etc. Conformity behaviors are usually motivated by a desire for peer acceptance and a fear of being ostracized. Social conformity can contribute to cyberbullying among adolescents at school. The desire for peer acceptance and the fear of social ostracism play a significant role in triggering such behaviors and form conflicts. The mechanisms that adolescents balance the conflicts and choose to conform is complex, so it is important to study and analyze peer conformity.

There are some news and cases suggest that group pressure can contribute to detrimental behaviors among adolescents. For example, in a 2025 news, multiple adolescents in Indiana were arrested for planning a school shooting on Snapchat after being encouraged by a peer [1]; Adolescents are highly susceptible to peer pressure, so they are more likely to adopt behaviors that align with bad norms and imitate delinquent behaviors [2].

Establishing school rules have multiple purposes. They are designed mainly to protect adolescents from various aspects. In tests or other campus events, school rules keep them fair and orderly. Similarly, social rules exist for ensuring basic fairness and safety in society. Though school rules are different, keeping uniformity in groups is the most important purpose. Different types of school rules are designed to serve various functions. Typically, they can be divided into three types: academic, behavioral, and security-related. Academic rules ensure academic fairness the impartiality. Behavioral rules emphasize the norms in daily interactions to ensure a placid atmosphere for studying. Safety rules protect students' safety and are related to maintaining a stable campus environment. The key point is, school rules represent a microcosm of society, and the relationship of them can be used to analyze how to design rules and reduce delinquency. For instance, the prohibition of cheating on campus is substantially consistent with that of defrauding in society. Thus, this paper will combine the two to discuss in the literature review and connect them with conformity.

When adolescents break rules, there are various types of violations. From fighting to aging public property, such behaviors cause damage to the collective honor and order. When these behaviors become consolidated due to peer conformity, the results may be of paramount importance, as the behaviors will fuel a cycle of misconduct and potentially spread beyond the school.

This paper aims to address the following research questions: (1) What processes are involved when adolescents break school rules due to peer conformity? (2) How can schools respond effectively to reduce rule-breaking behaviors associated with conformity pressure? This paper seeks to clarify the relationship between rule-breaking and conformity among adolescents through a literature review. Also, it aims to improve the understanding of peer conformity by offering insights into the factors or reasons of conformity which school managers can learn from to predict rule-breaking behaviors. The paper hopes to provide directions for school to set up rules that support regulation for adolescents or help with the adolescent development.

2. Conformity

Conformity is a central social psychological phenomenon among adolescents. Adolescents always conform subconsciously, but they hardly know why. This section begins by defining conformity and exploring its underlying motivations. After that, this paper will examine its manifestations, influencing factors and impacts. Obviously, having a clear understanding towards the reasons and way that conformity form is necessary. This paper will summarize basic theories and findings, to establish the understanding. Since the purpose of this paper is to provide some suggestions on setting school rules to adjust conformity and rule-breaking phenomenon, it will be helpful for later discussion on conformity's relationship with rule-breaking behavior.

2.1. Definition of conformity and why people conform

The common type of conformity among adolescents is called peer conformity. Peer conformity refers to the trend that adolescents align their behaviors or characteristics with peers, like classmates. To achieve social support or acceptance, adolescents may have multiple motivations for showing conformity. When they conform, adolescents act against their own preferences in order to please and fit in peers. The prevalence of conformity is influenced by psychological factors and developmental phases' characteristics. Individuals experience different psychosocial conflicts at various stages of life. During puberty, the desire to be special and fair of ostracization due to the nonconformity to groups of an individual create an interior conflict [3]. Despite individuals want to establish their

identities, under the conflicts, they have to make a decision between conformity or uniqueness. However, the reasons may not only be getting acceptance but also appears implicitly. To gain acceptance by their peers, adolescents finally choose to exhibit strong conformity. But they can also temporarily resolve uncertainty regarding identity. By imitating group behaviors, they reinforce their sense of belonging. Thus, it in turn contributes to adolescents' development of self-identity by enabling the self-identity closer to the group. The process seems disadvantageous, since adolescents may probably set identity inconsistent with their mind. But after all, conformity serves as a stage for their self-exploration [4].

2.2. The manifestation of conformity to peers

Depending on various environments, the manifestation can be diverse. But in the end, the manifestation may turn from unwilling to spontaneous after a complete fit in peers. Common manifestations are always bad and connected with rules-breaking, like smoking or bullying. They affect identity formation by influencing adolescents' thoughts and behaviors, making them experience cognitive dissonance. At the beginning, adolescents may believe those delinquent behaviors are wrong and they do them is only for acceptance. As longer they get well with the group, they will feel less cognitive dissonance when doing delinquent behaviors and imitate from the inside. However, there are other forms of conformity that are neutral or prosocial. Adolescents may follow classmates' positive behaviors or adopting healthier habits when peers set such norms. This demonstrates that conformity is not inherently harmful. The main factor of various manifestation is what peers tend to do.

2.3. Different factors influence conformity

Informational conformity occurs when individuals follow others because they believe those individuals possess superior knowledge, whereas normative conformity takes place when individuals conform in order to be liked or accepted by the group. These two types of conformity stem from different causes. Recent empirical research employing innovative experimental methods suggests that factors influencing conformity involve both situational elements and individual differences. Some research find that possible inducing factors of conformity includes external factors such as perception of a socialized agent or the authority of their peers [4, 5]. For internal factors like the characteristics of individual is also possible. However, considering this variable cannot be measured consistently, typically, the external pressure would induce conformity mostly.

2.4. Impacts of conformity to peers

Conformity can strengthen adolescents' sense of identity and self-esteem in relation to widely favored peers. Prior researches have already explored various reasons for conformity. Adolescents' attitudes shift quickly, so they will easily conform to peers. The nature of the influence, whether positive or negative, is based on what peers do. In online environments, group norms can lead adolescents to adopt cyberbullying or spread positive comments; in campus environment, adolescents can have prosocial or antisocial behaviors. Thus, the influence on external environment depends on the behaviors promoted by peers, a central factor dominated in school delinquency. After discussing the influence of conformity to external environment, conformity can have effects to an individual's internal mechanisms. Conformity can bring adolescents belief formation: they will tend to depend on external information to decide, instead of explore independently; conformity will

reduce adolescents' sensitivity to social information: as they grow from 10 to 20 years old, their self-efficacy and judgment ability both get impaired; besides, in the early-middle stage or puberty, adolescents' conformity behaviors strengthen the connection between the prefrontal cortex and the striatum. Therefore, the reward mechanism will be reinforced, making adolescents more sensitive to others' opinions [2].

3. Delinquency

3.1. The relationship between delinquency and school rules

Building on that the guiding influence of conformity on adolescents' behaviors is directly related to whether they will obey or break school rules, it is imperative to discuss and summarize the relationship between school rules and delinquency. School rules can be regarded as a microcosm of social norms. Violating school rules may represent similarities with violating social rules, since they both involve challenging norms and order. Behaviors such as cheating or fighting in school parallel forms of social misconduct like fraud or violence. Research have found that delinquency may be predicted by school bullying. The violations of school rules are intimately related to whether adolescents will behave delinquent or antisocial behaviors in the future [6]. Also, rule-breaking will undermine trust and weakens the integrity of a whole group, since the violations of norms will mostly come from school and determine their future perceptions of norms. Adolescents' incivility at school can predict future misconducts at school, causing adolescents to behave more serious delinquent behaviors in society [7]. School environment and rules are determinant on adolescents' future regulatory behaviors. These results underscore the importance of focusing on school rules due to the detriment of future, but conformity may also play a role cause adolescents always violate school rules together. Conformity probably is a factor that influence the violations of school rules and then delinquency, so this paper will then discuss the factor causes delinquency and provide a deeper understanding.

3.2. Factors that influence delinquency

The delinquent behaviors of adolescents may be intentional. However, during the ambiguous stage of identity exploration, delinquency may be influenced by multiple factors. Research shows that the involvement with delinquent peers predicts adolescents' own delinquent behavior. Peers may implicitly implement pressure, so adolescents will be forced to violate rules voluntarily or involuntarily, representing that conformity might be a factor prompt delinquency. On the other hand, school or family supervision relates to delinquency, because the exist of family violence may induce the dependence of adolescents to external information and lack of independent thinking. The lack of an atmosphere of fairness and care in school can cause students be more likely to develop rebellious tendencies and increase in rule-breaking behaviors [8].

3.3. Impact and negative consequences of conformity

When it comes to conformity, it acts as a double-edged sword: it can amplify deviant peer behavior, yet within structured school environments, conformity may actually strengthen norm adherence [8]. Conforming to deviant peers doesn't just increase antisocial behavior during adolescence. It also predicts worse psychological and academic outcomes later in life [9]. These findings underscore how powerfully conformity influences pathways into delinquency, making it crucial to acknowledge the negative consequences that often follow.

4. Social rules

4.1. The relationship of social rules with delinquency

Social rules are the literal restraints of the accepted behaviors for groups, and they generally limit the individual's behaviors. Delinquency refers to the deviation from established rules. The two are conceptually subordinate and referential: social rules designate the boundary of accepted behaviors; delinquency, by this reference, refers to any behavior that exceeds this boundary. After clarifying the concepts of social rules and delinquency, it is necessary to discuss the internal and external factors that influence the individual's decision whether to follow the rules or not [10].

4.2. Reason for obeying the rules: internal and external conflicts

When adolescents violating rules, it is difficult to find out their inner mechanisms and thoughts. So, clarifying the reasons is difficult, but researchers believe that it is related to the conflicts of adolescents on both thoughts and body, even including biological and sociological factors. Human possesses a basic sense of morality. It can be observed in the infant phase, explaining that conformity behaviors may originate from native development. In the school setting, whether students obey the rules is influenced by group norms and the behaviors of their peers. Differences between informative conformity and normative conformity indicate that these two types of cues jointly influence adolescents' choices.

Generally, there are various reasons to break social rules, where internal conflict is an important mechanism. When conflicts arise between self-identity and social expectations, adolescents may eccentrically regard rebelling against rules as a way to express individuality [9]; if parents' love is opaque and lacks direct care, adolescents' identity development will be easily hampered and may lead to more delinquency. In another way, external legitimacy plays a role. The following text will further combine cases of school rules and cases of violations to illustrate the core role of legality in determining rule compliance. The lack of transparency and legitimacy in rules will significantly reduce adolescents' willingness to obey and may induce their delinquency as a form of rebellion against these rules [11]. In conclusion, the reasons for violating social rules consist of both internal and external factors.

4.3. Factors that influence whether people choose to break or not

Whether people violate the rules is the result of the interaction of multiple factors. Situational factors are of paramount importance. The way parents express their emotions can affect whether adolescents get along well with their peers. If the approach makes children feel restricted, they may be more likely to engage in misbehavior [12]. Out of the long-term influence, in the moment of decision, adolescents are more likely to conform to break the rules when the situation is ambiguous [13], such as there is no existed directions and examples.

5. School rules

Since there is a similarity between the social rules and school rules, it is necessary to understand both of the rules. Conformity can occur under both conditions. The mechanisms and reasons might be different under different factors, like ages, maturity, environment, but underlying connections are existed under these rules. Moreover, an individual's puberty is deeply related to its adulthood. This research will then be swift to discuss school rules and explore connections for final discussion.

5.1. Roles of schools and the definition of school rules

School rules typically to norms that give acceptable and prohibitive behaviors of students. Similar to social norms, school rules also define the boundaries of behaviors, but they primarily concentrate on maintaining order in the educational environment or protect students' safety. School rules are necessary for order and adolescents' value. At the same time, different types of school rules are responsible for different aspects. The types relate to different reasons and factors that adolescents break them, so this paper is going to list different types of school rules.

5.2. Different types of school rules

School rules serve three primary functions. they maintain classroom order and ensure a safe learning environment; they protect students' right to education by establishing boundaries; they serve as a conveyance of social norms and help students develop social skills.

School rules can be categorized by purpose and content. A classic classification comes from Thornberg. He divides school rules into five categories: Relational rules, which govern how students interact with others; structuring rules, which establish daily routines; protecting rules, which protect personal and environmental safety; etiquette rules, which offer a definition of manners; personal rules, which address individual behavior and self-management [14]. Among these five types of rules, adolescents are most likely to violate structuring rules and etiquette rules, since these rules is more or less the standard of a student. The standard implicitly designates what a adolescent should be, so adolescents may feel that their uniqueness is being eroded by the rules. In order to become special, adolescents will achieve this by breaking the rules.

5.3. Different reasons for violation and possible factors

The reasons students violate school rules are closely linked to peer influence and perceptions of the rules' legitimacy. Asch's classic conformity study proves that under group pressure, individuals tend to conform to others for not to make them seems strange and inconsistent of the group [15]. These experiment results can be concluded to students that break school rules. These all represent the factors and reasons of normative conformity, to get accepted and prevent ostracism. Informative conformity is more reflected when students are facing an opaque situation. They need to depend on their peers' behaviors to decide what is correct. Conversely, students are more likely to comply when rules are perceived as clear; if rules' authority is undermined, students may view the school as untrustworthy. The lack of authority will definitely increase the probability of rule-breaking and bring bad consequences. It is worth considering to balance the authority and rationality of school rules.

Breaking school rules lead to negative consequences that hurt students' multifaceted development. Students may get sanctions by the school thus their rights will be insulted; the break of rules erode students' sense of belonging; students that are seen as rule breakers have worse psychological health and may have higher anxious level. These consequences may even potentially extend into adulthood [16].

6. Discussion

This review will now discuss the similarities between school rules and social rules. Most recent research indicates that both share the common purpose of regulating behavior and creating an

equitable environment. Considering individual reactions, while the contexts in which they are applied differ, clear correlations can be observed.

When the legitimacy of rules is established, whether they are social or school rules, people will follow them. Moreover, when informative conformity and normative conformity are at play, rules will be both accepted and adhered to. Then, to better mitigate the negative influence of conformity, the reasons for conflicts and rule-breaking are analyzed. According to several studies, when individuals conflict with their identity and rules, they can seriously break the rules. The violation of rules can also be attributed to the acceptance of peers. When the consequences of the rules are clear, the pressure from the rules is higher than that from peers, and negative conformity is suppressed. When the consequences of an action are unclear, peer conformity may lead to the spread of delinquency. Sanctions for violations are similar: the degree of sanction is far less determinant than the inevitability of sanction in preventing breaking rules. In society, the deterrent effect of imposing harsher sanctions is limited and may even increase delinquency; in schools, severe sanctions often lead to poorer academic performance [16]. Some violations can even persist from childhood into adulthood.

As mentioned earlier, conformity can lead to strict, risky behaviors. While adolescents can present prosocial behaviors under which most students tend to help each other, smoking, intemperance, and fighting caused by peer pressure and the collective violation of school rules due to the desire for acceptance are prevalent, however. Apart from high-risk behaviors, conformity can prompt students to perform cheating, but various situations decide the details. When conformity comes with sanctions, the punishment by the campus can neither prevent delinquency, but instead perform a trend that increases conformity with peers in the long term. Punishment has a negative relationship with mental health and school experiences [17]. On the contrary, conformity could also diffuse delinquency due to the lack of sanctions. Conformity-caused delinquency can increase when students perceive that the executive force is low. Thus, the existence of sanctions seemingly cannot influence whether students' delinquency can be reduced. The most determining factor is the legitimacy and rationality of the rules [11].

Based on previous evidence of conformity and rule violations, some possible interventions are listed to manage the school. Rather than relying solely on punishment, schools are encouraged to demonstrate the authority and consistency of their rules and incorporate positive encouragement to promote conformity when enforcing them. Tyler's research shows that the possibility of students spontaneously obeying rules is obviously increased when rules are fair and rational [11]. Additionally, the Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) model significantly reduces conformity to delinquency by setting clear expectations and providing positive feedback [18]. In sum, with sanctions, the reflection of legitimacy in rules can lead to conformity with the rules.

As authoritative representatives in the school, teachers' judgment of the situation is also key to controlling conformity. Under the conformity-caused delinquency, the teacher's task is to make the rules clear. Emotional support provided by teachers is a pivotal factor in improving and adjusting students' behaviors. Thus, the need of punishment will also be reduced, forming a virtuous cycle [19]. Therefore, teachers should first take the time to get to know their students and peers by patiently explaining the purpose of rules. By doing this, teachers give students a sense of legitimacy for the rules and allow them to imitate their peers' obedience to rules [11]. A complete prohibition is not practical, as it may induce a sense of rejection among students. In sum, schools should track students' behaviors continuously. The track process should avoid intervention but become a pure observation. Schools should know that pure sanctions and punishments may easily cause students' extreme emotions and fail to adjust the rule-breaking inundation.

7. Conclusion

This study reviews the literature on conformity and rule-breaking and aim to uncover some mechanism that drive adolescents to violate school rules. Specifically, this study takes peer pressure and conformity as factors to analyze and hope to provide clear relationship between them. This paper conclude that conformity will intervene adolescents' identity formation and cause adolescents imitate prosocial or delinquent behaviors. School rules and social rules have high similarity in consequences of violation. This similarity provides an extra media to analyze the reasons and factors of peer conformity. Also, rule legitimacy plays a crucial role in determining whether a rule is perceived as authoritative. Legitimacy will cause a significant effect on the decision of breaking rules or not.

Punitive measures alone are ineffective in controlling rule-breaking phenomenon. Completely implementing punishment instead reinforce students' conformity, and the following consequences is that psychological health and academic performances will be exacerbated. Effective interventions should focus on establishing an authoritative rule system. Based on former analysis, there are several available methods. Enhancing teachers' emotional and behavioral support is crucial. In puberty phase, confuse and negative moods are pervasive among adolescents. A teacher that can understand adolescents' conflicts and conciliate them can usefully solve the conformity. Sometimes the conformity and delinquency may be unintentional or just for raising attention. Once their identity conflicts are solved, such conformity can be easily eradicated. Also, academic models such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) are effective in promoting students' understanding of why establishing rules. Many reasons for violating rules may be due to a lack of understanding of the rules. Once adolescents are clearly taught the necessity and reasons of establishing rules, they may show more comprehensive considerations. For the consistency and interests of the group, the priority of following rules might take precedence over conformity-caused violations. Additionally, schools should implement continuous tracking of students' behaviors. Then, based on the students' later behaviors, schools can set feedback systems for addressing rule-breaking tendencies among students. If the macro tend of delinquency can be identified, it could be more helpful, since schools can improve the rules continuously based on the trend and reduce conformity.

This study primarily draws on Western theoretical frameworks and empirical research, with limited exploration of conformity behavior in other cultural contexts. This literature review does not encompass all recent research findings, so it potentially introduces publication bias. Also, the researches founded include some other literature review, reducing the reference value of this research. Moreover, different cultures may have varying understandings regarding rules and delinquency. The culture differences have always been under strong research potential, future research should compare cross-cultural situations to identify differences in the mechanisms of conformity in diverse culture. Instead of solely reducing rule-breaking, shifting toward improving prosocial behavior can offer greater benefits. Exploring how to utilize conformity to increase the prosocial and positive behaviors in school can be another direction for future researches.

Although recent studies clearly showcase the relationship between conformity and adolescents' delinquency in school, there are still some limits. First, many studies rely on cross-sectional designs. These studies can only demonstrate a correlational relationship between variables, but they cannot establish a cause-and-effect relationship. Additionally, it cannot illustrate the changing orbits of variables over time. Just as the suggestions to school mentioned, long-term tracking of students' behaviors is necessary in both school and conformity research. Future researches should consider using various approaches such as longitudinal study in order to reveal the long-term effects of conformity. Future research could compare adolescents in collectivist and individualist cultures to

explore whether there are differences in the school and social norms. By doing so, researches would greatly deepen the understanding of conformity in deeper stance.

In summary, conformity itself is not inherently negative. Its direction depends on the nature of the behavior of the group and peers. Through analysis and adjust toward school rules, or other external factors, schools can transform it into a positive force that promotes school environment. They will realize that is properly utilize conformity, delinquent behaviors can be reduced, and prosocial behaviors will increase.

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