

What first comes to mind when you hear the word “conformity?” For many people concepts such as Nazi Germany, the dictatorship of Mao Zedong (of the communist party of China), and the ruling of Joseph Stalin (leader of the Soviet Union) enter the forefront of the mind. When I first hear the word conformity though, my mind automatically jumps to the Buckhead district of Atlanta.

According to USA.com, the average household income in 2010 was \$56,644. In comparison, the average income of a household in the 30327 zip code, or Buckhead district, was \$200,957. In 2000, Caucasians made up 72.41% of the total US population, whereas in Buckhead 90.41% of the population is white. Of the American population who attend high school, 9.35% are enrolled in private schools. Contrasting this percent, 71.43% of the Buckhead high school populations attend private schools.

Before coming to Oxbow, I saw no issue with the population of the “Buckhead bubble”. Luckily, by coming to Oxbow and stepping away from the bubble, I have had time to reflect on living in such an environment. The experiences, which I have had in these short months at Oxbow, have broadened my perspective of the world and made me more appreciative of variation. Until this year, I believed Buckhead was a great place to live. I have come to realize that Buckhead is primarily filled with spoiled, ungrateful, similarly dressed, materialistic, ignorant, Caucasian people. Fueled by my repugnance towards the lack of diversity, which exists in Buckhead, I began researching uniformity.

It is first important to address what uniformity is. Merriam-Webster defines uniform as “consistent in conduct or opinion,” and “presenting an unvaried appearance of surface, pattern, or color.” I believe these definitions combined accurately describe how I feel about the majority of the population of Buckhead. Through self-reflection and research though, I came to the realization that the uniformity in Buckhead is not what aggravates me, but that my irritation stems from a deeper concern. That concern is conformity, because in order for a group of people to be uniform, they must first conform.

What is conformity? Saul McLeod, author of “What is Conformity?” has defined conformity as a type of social influence involving a change in belief or behavior in order to fit in with a group. In 1955, Psychologist Richard Crutchfield studied conformity and performed a number of social experiments. Upon completing these experiments, he defined conformity simply as “yielding to group pressures.” These “group pressures” take many different forms, such as bullying, persuasion, teasing, criticism, incentives, and alienation. In the same way group pressure comes in a variety of forms, there are multiple forms of conformity.

The first and most recognized form of conformity is normative conformity. Normative conformity refers to the type of conformity in which a person gives in to group pressure because he or she wants to fit in. In this case, the person is scared of being rejected. This form of conformity can be observed in the Asch Line Study. In 1951, Solomon Asch, an American psychologist, conducted an experiment to focus on how easily an individual's opinions can be altered by a group. He conducted this experiment by testing eight people at one time. In this experiment, four lines were projected onto a screen. The participants were asked to identify which line was the same length as the first. The test subjects were unaware of the fact that, although they were being tested with seven other people, they were the only real participants. The other seven “participants” were actually Asch’s associates. One-by-one, Asch called on the participants to give their answer to which line was identical to the first. Each time, Asch asked his seven associates, who answered falsely, before asking the real test subject. This experiment was done multiple times with different people. After collecting the data, Asch deduced that 74%

of real participants gave the false answer that the majority of the group of Asch's associates gave at least one of the times they were asked. Although the correct answer was brutally obvious, the real subject would generally follow the preceding "subjects" and answer the question falsely, in order to fit in.

Another form of conformity is informational conformity. This form of conformity occurs when a person lacks knowledge. In this case, due to their lack of knowledge, he or she looks to the group for guidance and typically conforms to the majority. An example of this form of conformity is an experiment performed by the Turkish psychologist Muzafer Sherif. In 1935, Sherif conducted an auto kinetic experiment. The auto kinetic phenomenon refers to the apparent movement of a fixed point of light being observed in a dark room. Due to the lack of additional light, the eye has no additional reference points. For this reason, the brain is unable to compensate and the small eye movements deceive the brain into believing the light has moved. He conducted this experiment by first putting each of his subjects in a darkened room individually. He told his subjects that light would be shown in front of them, extinguished and shown again. He then posed the question, "how far did the light move?" Although the light did not move at all, because the individuals were asked how far it moved, each assumed it had certainly moved and gave a distance. After testing the participants separately, he then conducted the same experiment multiple times in a group setting. He found that all individuals gave distances similar to whatever distance was said by the first participant to speak in the group setting, regardless of their previous distances. His ultimate findings proved that because the participants had no knowledge of how far, or even if, the light moved, they depended on and based their estimated off of the distance given by the first participant.

The third form of conformity is identification. This subconscious act of conforming occurs when one conforms to the expectations of a social role. This form of conforming is demonstrated in the Stanford Prison Experiment. In 1973, Philip Zimbardo, psychologist and professor at Stanford, wanted to study the roles people play in prison situations. To execute his experiment, he first converted the basement of the Stanford University psychology building into a mock prison with barred windows and doors. He then searched for volunteers who were willing to spend two weeks participating in this experiment. After choosing 24 male students as participants of the experiment, Zimbardo assigned them to play the role of either prisoner or guard at random. The prison simulation was kept as authentic as possible: arresting the "prisoners" at their homes, fingerprinting, photographing and "booking" them at the police station, before transporting them to the basement of the university. Upon arriving at the "prison," the prisoners were stripped naked, searched, and issued uniforms. In just a few short hours from starting the experiment, Zimbardo observed that the guards had already begun harassing the inmates, adopting the habits of typical prison guards. After the completion of the experiment, one guard revealed to Zimbardo, "I was surprised at myself. I made them call each other names and clean the toilets out with their bare hands. I practically considered the prisoners cattle and I kept thinking I had to watch out for them in case they tried something." Like-wise, the prisoners soon began conforming to fulfill the average prisoner's behavior by "telling-tales" on other prisoners and following the rules very seriously. Like the 33% of the average American daily jail population who develop and suffer from mental illnesses, one prisoner was released less than two days into the experiment due to uncontrollable bursts of crying and screaming. Six days into the originally planned two week experiment, Zimbardo found all the results he needed and closed the experiment down eleven days early, as he felt there was danger that someone might be physically or emotional damaged if the experiment was continued.

After learning there are three main types of conformity: normative, informational, and identification, I discovered that there are two possible responses to conformity, which are not dependent on the reasons one has for conforming. These two responses are internalization and compliance. Internalization occurs when someone publicly changes behavior to fit in with the majority, while also agreeing with them privately. It is also possible for one to conform, but to privately disagree with the group. This idea of publicly accepting the views of a group, while privately rejecting them is known as compliance. For example, many of the guards from Zimbardo's experiment claimed to be horrified by their mistreatment of the inmates. This is an example of a situation when the people conforming respond with compliance: the guards publicly conformed to fit the social role and actively participated in the dehumanization of the prisoners, while privately rejecting the ill treatment of another human. Internalization would have occurred if any of the guards believed the prisoners deserved the mistreatment. In such a scenario, not only would the guard have participated in the dehumanization of the prisoners, but he would have also believed he was entitled to do so.

Why do we conform? Through doing my research, I learned that there are multiple reasons for conforming. People conform because they either want to fit in, want to impress people, lack knowledge, or feel the need to fulfill social roles. Researching for this paper has made me reconsider my opinion on conformity. After completing my research, I realized that conformity is natural. Through self-reflection, I also came to realize that I should not be angry about the uniformity that exists within the population of Buckhead. I am my harshest critic. Likewise, I judge my own city and situation more harshly than any others. For this reason, I viewed the uniformity in Buckhead as a terrible thing, when in reality the uniformity among the population in Buckhead is no greater than the uniformity that exists anywhere else. As I shifted my focus away from the negative aspects of living in a bubble and towards an open-minded perspective of conformity, I began to recognize how common and subconscious the act of conforming actually is. By stopping at stop signs, we are conforming to the authority of the United States government. By wearing clothes or participating in any form of hygiene, we are conforming to social norms. Subconsciously we all conform, so is conformity really a bad thing? This is one question I believe I will be actively exploring for the duration of my life.