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Humanities  
3 October 2022

### Conformity: People vs. Person

In the modern day, education serves as a symbol of a developed country. The United States of America, a country commonly associated with freedom and democracy, places a heavy emphasis on education with policies and laws mandating education for all children. The priority that America places on schooling comes from a longstanding tradition of higher level education, starting in the early settlement of America in the 1700s. Although schooling in America began as a social construct asserted solely for the upper classes of society, it evolved to encourage consumerism with the rise of the industrial revolution. Soon, the school system was adapted to prepare the laboring class for factory work, seen even in the modern day. John Gatto, a well-known American author and educator, frequently drew connections between the American education system and a factory environment, emphasizing the idea that education in the United States is outdated. The American school system encourages conformity to an extent that can inhibit independent thinking due to an outdated education model, social pressure, and a lack of emphasis on real world global issues.

While modern day society appears to encourage individualism, it actually perpetuates conformity. Although conformity has its benefits for groups, excessive amounts of conformity can damage one's self identity. This damage to self identity begins in schools and is closely associated with the concept of groupthink. Groupthink is a psychological phenomenon that affects people in a group. In such a setting, the desire for conformity causes the group to make skewed and often irrational decisions. The most prominent issue with groupthink is how it harms individual identity and creativity. According to Irving Janis, the person who coined the term groupthink, groups "are most likely to experience groupthink when they are highly cohesive, insulated from experts, perform limited search and appraisal of information, operate under

directed leadership, and experience conditions of high stress with low self-esteem” (Pratkanis and Turner 105). Although Janis focuses on the workforce in his statement, these traits are also prevalent in the school system. In schools, the information that students absorb is directed by the authority in question, typically the teachers. The issue also lies with the detrimental impact that groupthink leaves on self expression and healthy dissent. Healthy dissent is essential for constructive criticism and the reworking of ideas and solutions. A lack of dissent creates the perfect environment for groupthink to fester. In their investigation on groupthink and its relationship with ritualistic synchrony, Michele Gelfand and her team note that the effects of groupthink “could be hypothetically beneficial when groups need to make quick consensus-based decisions, but destructive when diversity and healthy disagreement are important for groups to make effective decisions”. There are undeniable benefits in group work and the presence of a group identity. Gelfand et al. describe the social benefits of ritualistic synchrony and their impact on mindset in their paper, *The cultural evolutionary trade-off of ritualistic synchrony*. Ritualistic synchrony refers to the act of completing activities in unison with others. From an evolutionary standpoint, factions of people who had increased levels of synchrony were more likely to survive, meaning our brains are hardwired to strive to be in a group setting. Through simulated lab experiments and observation of real world behaviors, Gelfand discerned that when working in sync with others, “individuals were more likely to make decisions that benefited the group as a whole, even at their own personal cost, and had increased cooperation, cohesion, and the way the group was perceived” (Gelfand et al.). Despite these benefits, the increased cohesion can lead to detrimental outcomes. In fact, “several studies have found that synchrony can promote conformity..., aggression,... and destructive obedience”. This concept is reiterated by Gatto’s claim that “school trains children to obey reflexively.” Schools currently maintain an environment that demands conformity to an academic standard in a manner that is reminiscent of factory-like culture. Such an environment emphasizes the maximization of production, due to its historical basis in the industrial revolution.

This “need” for maximum efficacy is seen in society even today. Students are encouraged to strive for perfection, often pitted against one another in a sham of a competition that creates even more harmful pressure on students.

Additionally, the current school system fails to address the power imbalance in society despite serving as a center of development for youth. Our moral principles are heavily influenced by our observation of social dynamics and the environment around us. Our social interactions with others begin at an early age, especially in regards to early education such as preschool and kindergarten. At this stage, education is less about core classes like reading and math and more about learning to interact with others and form a basic understanding of the life lessons that are upheld in society. According to educator Horace Mann, the social environment a child grows up with has a significant impact on their being. A child who may have a harsh home life may “grow up with all the coarseness, narrowness, prejudices, and bad manners” (Mann). Things that occur in one's childhood can change the way they think and act. Even seemingly meaningless children's stories often convey important themes and beliefs that can shape our understanding of society as a whole. We create stories and tales to educate our children on what is morally correct and incorrect. Although the social environment of school plays a vital role in foundational instruction, the education system is also highly restrictive and does not account for external pressures in one's personal life. Parental and peer pressure can alter one's education and create a power imbalance perpetuated by the failure of the school system's ability to account for such external pressures.. The comfort of being in a group setting directly relates to our inherent desire to fit into a crowd. Since humans naturally want to fit in, they will often shift their own moral values to align with others. In fact, many studies have “found that synchrony made people more likely to copy majority opinions when selecting products, rather than following their personal preferences” (Gelfand et al.). As peer pressure worsens, people are less likely to argue for their viewpoint and even worse- are less likely to continually bring up alternative views. This not only decreases individual thinking but also perpetuates

possibly harmful beliefs. Stereotyping plays a major role when it comes to peer pressure particularly in teenage students. Theodore Sizer, a prominent figure in the American education reform movement, claimed that as people, “we try to make sense of strangers, the quicker the better. Although one tries to rein in one’s judgments, one still makes them.” Humans instinctively observe and make assumptions about their surroundings, simply for survival. The stereotyping that is done in highschools is often affected by society, particularly the pop culture and trends going around at the time. One of the best known comedy films of the early 2000s, Mean Girls, served as a mockery of the stereotypes that circulate in American highschools but also highlighted their prominence in society. The pressure to conform to a stereotype is one that is particularly detrimental, especially when considering its impact on individualism. Ultimately, our environment molds us early on to fit a stereotype that often seems impossible to break out of, limiting the creativity of individual students. Developing a sense of individualism is one of the biggest areas where American education fails to provide adequate instruction. That inadequacy is furthered by the recent increase in private education and extracurriculars which allow students to explore areas of their interest. Although these opportunities seem to be the ideal solution for the failures of the American education system, they are often costly and consequently cater solely to a selective economic class. Children who receive this private education are often better prepared for the education system and obstacles on their way to the workforce, furthering the wealth gap in the United States. People who are born into richer families end up remaining richer because of the opportunities they can afford to pay for. Since public education often tends to push for conformity within its students, it often suppresses some students and forces others to rush through concepts they may not fully understand. This ends up furthering the education inequality between students who are considered “high performing” and those viewed as “low performing”. Considering that “high-performing” students often come from wealthier families, the current school model continues to feed into the income inequality prevalent in the United States by exclusively serving high income individuals and hindering

economically disadvantaged individuals. In order to remedy this divide, the education system must be remodeled to decrease the rushing of instruction and suppression of interest, therefore mitigating the societal power imbalance.

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