Societal Conformity in Muslim Youth

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Abstract

This paper will explore the factors that lead a person to conform to society and what drives an individual to confidently be himself. Everyone is subject to conforming at one point or multiple points in his/her life. Today, diversity in beliefs is common and attainable to most, enabling people to conform faster. This paper will target the topic of Muslim youth conforming to a non-Muslim society. However, conformity is not necessarily the sole outcome of being introduced into a society with different norms. Factors such as having a solid Islamic foundation, finding a group of people who share common beliefs, and at times being able to be independent, allow individuals to reject the negative pressure of society and stand strong in their values.

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Conformity is the tendency of a person within a group of people different from him-or-herself to change in order to fit in (Webster’s Dictionary, 2020).Various reasons why people conform include: dependence on other people, low self-esteem, lack of motivation, and fear (Exploring your mind, 2017). The two main types of conformity are normative conformity and informational conformity (McLeod, 2018). Normative conformity occurs out of the desire to be accepted and the fear of being rejected. While informational conformity occurs out of the belief that the majority is more knowledgeable. Adolescents are challenged by normative influences. According to Zhang, Deng, and Liu (2016), adolescents with fear of judgment are more likely to conform. Conformity can happen at any time, oftentimes subconsciously. People, no matter their age, race, or religion, are prone to conform to at least some extent (Frey, 2016).

Whether at school, work, or in a living environment such as with roommates, there are always situations in which people feel the necessity to conform. For instance, a new person joins a friendship group, and the individuals in that group are accustomed to smoking. Although the new individual does not smoke, he may be more inclined to start smoking because the people around him are enticing him with their collective behavior. Even if smoking violated this person’s values or morals, he likely would consciously or subconsciously have negative thoughts about refusing (C. George Boeree, 2009). Thoughts like, “What if they don’t like me anymore?” or “What if they think I’m weird?” can lead/cause/entice/encourage him to give in and join his friends. Because of this, spending time with others whose beliefs challenge his own can negatively impact a person’s moral compass.

Most individuals have their own values that guide them throughout life. These beliefs develop beginning in early childhood, continue through adolescence, and are enforced in adulthood (Lumen, n.d.). Typically, parents have the largest influence on a young child’s character (Lumen, n.d.). Children assimilate anything and everything they see, by either directly being taught or by observation (Rymanowicz, 2015). However, when adolescents withdraw from their more restrictive environment and are introduced into society, now less sheltered by their parents, they face additional influences that, at times, clash with their forming beliefs. Muslim youth, in particular, are confronted by a society with completely different customs, from the style of expression to the style of dress.

Differences in social norms could result in acculturation for Muslim youth, especially if previously in a sheltered environment. Muslim youth, when leaving a protected environment,such as a private Islamic school, are susceptible to conforming to mainstream non-Muslim society in ways that cause them to abandon the values and practices of their upbringing. Unless they are able to stand firm in their beliefs by having a solid foundation, by finding people who share common values, and by having the confidence to be independent, young Muslims will likely succumb to societal pressure and adopt mainstream values and cultural norms.

Parents are typically responsible for 20% to 50% of child outcomes (Maccoby, 2000). As children transition into adolescence, they spend more time with their peer groups and less time with their families (Herbert, 2015). Adolescents favor acceptance from their peers over standing out and being different (NCBI, 2011). Rather than relying on their parents, adolescents will be more influenced by their peers, causing them to make, at times, rash decisions (Herbert, 2015). According to Lumen Learning, an online course, “Adolescents often engage in increased risk-taking behaviors and experience heightened emotions during puberty; this may be due to the fact that the frontal lobes of their brains—which are responsible for judgment, impulse control, and planning—are still maturing until early adulthood (Casey, Tottenham, Liston, & Durston, 2005).”

Considering children become more independent from their parents when they reach adolescence, it is important to build their foundation when they are young. As stated by Facts for Life, a handbook that teaches how to protect and help children grow, “Recent research confirms that the first five years are particularly important for the development of the child's brain, and the first three years are the most critical in shaping the child's brain architecture. Early experiences provide the base for the brain's organizational development and functioning throughout life. They have a direct impact on how children develop learning skills as well as social and emotional abilities.”(n.d.). Hence, being a parent entails teaching children values at a young age, before they become independent.

Islamically, parents and children have responsibilities towards each other. Children must respect and honor their parents. Allah (The Most Glorified, The Most High) says in Surah Al-Isra, ayah 23: “And your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him. And that you be dutiful to your parents. If one of them or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of disrespect, nor shout at them but address them in terms of honor” (translated by Muhsin Khan). However, parents also bear the responsibility of raising their children with love and support. As reported by Bihar, a companion of Prophet Muhammed (may peace and blessings be upon him), in a hadith, "As are the children disinherited for their disobedience so also it is possible that the parents may be disowned by the children for not fulfilling their bonding duties.” (Bihar Al-Anwar, v 19, p. 93). This stresses the importance of parents’ influence on children’s lives. It is the parent’s job to nurture his/her/the/ child and to build them a firm Islamic foundation, so when the children are introduced into society, they will be able to hold steadfast in their faith.

As important as it is to have a strong foundation, humans by nature need social interactions and bonds (Lieberman, 2013). However, finding a friendship group who shares common beliefs, in addition to common interests, is crucial. For example, imagine the individual who did not smoke, yet began due to his friendship group, had an additional friend who shared his beliefs against smoking. Now, with an ally, this individual will have the support to remain independent and the strength to challenge normative conformity (Sparks, n.d.). As adolescents age, they become increasingly independent. It is essential, therefore, that adolescents find a secure friend group to rely on. A study by Lisa Knoll and her colleagues at the University College London’s Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience showed that younger adolescents are more influenced by their peers than by adults, while older adolescents are equally influenced by their peers and adults. Since young adolescents are more influenced by their peers, it is more pressing for them to be surrounded by positive peer influence.

Though peer pressure is normally associated with a negative connotation, peer pressure can be both positive and negative. In 2005, psychologist Laurence Steinberg and his co-author, psychologist Margo Gardner, conducted an experiment regarding peer pressure, concluding, “The presence of peers makes adolescents and youth, but not adults, more likely to take risks.” In later years, however (2011), Steinberg revisited peer pressure with a new experiment and came to a different conclusion: “Teenagers learn more quickly and more effectively when their peers are present than when they're on their own.”. In this way, peer pressure is positive. Additionally, there are several benefits of having a friend group to rely on.

Heather Monroe, a psychotherapist and licensed clinical social worker, expresses the positive effects of friendship groups, including: better self-esteem, lower rates of anxiety and depression, more optimism, heightened emotional regulation skills, increased empathy and feelings of trust toward others, and an enhanced ability to cope after stressful events. Moreover, these benefits often result in improved mental health as adolescents enter young adulthood (Monroe, 2018). Therefore, strong support groups are important. Choosing friendship and support groups with shared religious belief is even more important.

Muslim youth should strive to befriend people of the same religion. Al-Muhasibi narrates in a hadith, “Your best friend is the one who: seeing him reminds you of Allah, speaking to him increases your knowledge, and his actions remind you of the hereafter.”. Imagine having a friend who does not share the same beliefs. For example, a Muslim individual who is friends with a Christian individual. Regardless of the amount of similarities between them, they will always have differing beliefs. Take clothing for example, Muslim women wear a hijab (head scarf), while other individuals do not wear the hijab. For a Muslim woman, it could be more likely for her to think about taking off her hijab if surrounded by people who do not wear one.

Young Muslim women who wear a hijab are easily differentiated from a crowd and at times attract unwanted attention. With Islamophobia on the rise, it is not a surprise that some Muslims are afraid of unnecessary public exposure. This fear of publicity may pressure them to conform. However, by having a close circle of Muslim friends, Muslim adolescents will have the confidence to remain strong in their beliefs. Despite having a Muslim friendship group, the ability to be independent is necessary.

There will be circumstances in life when moral support is not present. Whether at the supermarket, school, or at work, there will be individuals who have differing values from oneself. This means that everyone needs to know how to uphold and defend her/his own beliefs in order to resist conforming. The methods for doing so are not set. Some mechanisms used to battle conformity are: the desire to maintain control of one’s life, the desire to retain a sense of individuality, and committing to an opinion by telling others (PsychTeacher, n.d.).

Someone’s desire to maintain control of her life enables her to become a determined individual (Scott Mautz, Inc, 2019). This is different from the need to control others; rather it is a need to have control of one’s own life. For instance, taking control of life by focusing on a personal agenda. Adolescents tend to be involved with their peers, and could get deeply involved in their lives. Focusing on one’s daily life and disentangling one’s self from obsessing over others’ affairs could enable a person to become more independent. Additionally, youth, as mentioned, regard the opinions of peers highly. So, in order to be in control, people must discard the desire to please others, and alternately strive to please themselves. Another aspect includes understanding and accepting that not everything is controllable. Some individuals utilize this mechanism as a means to remain firm in his/her values, but it does not necessarily work for everyone. For others, the desire to retain a sense of individuality helps them remain committed to their values.

Individuals who show signs of conformity would put effort into proving their individuality (PsychTeacher, n.d.).“The Theory of Uniqueness (Snyder &Fromkin, 1980) asserts that excessive similarity of one's self to others will be negatively interpreted, and therefore, will result in greater seeking of differences to maintain one's separate identity.” (Okamato,1983). In this way, people may value their uniqueness over control in their life. Another study concluded that individuals were more content being moderately different than others rather than being extremely similar or dissimilar (Snyder, Lopez, 2011). Youth seek acceptance from their peers; however, for some, individuality is valued more.

One last method to resist conformity is commiting to an opinion by informing others. An individual would be more likely to uphold a goal or value if shared with someone than if the individual did not tell anyone.

A new set of studies reveal that people have greater goal commitment and performance when they tell their goal to someone they believe has higher status than themselves. According to Howard Klein, an Ohio State business professor: Contrary to what you may have heard, in most cases you get more benefit from sharing your goal than if you don't -- as long as you share it with someone whose opinion you value. (Haden, 2019)

Most adolescents naturally depend on their peers, and may be inclined to use this method over the others. By conversing with peers, parents, siblings or even a trusted teacher, individuals may be more motivated to uphold his/her values. These are only a minute number of methods that can be used to develop independence.

Conformity is a phenomenon studied by many over the years. Although it is nearly unavoidable, conformity can have positive outcomes. However, to conform to something positive, one must be surrounded by that positive influence. Muslim youth are faced with a society with radically different standards. Mainstream American society encourages people to wear revealing clothing, accepts the use of bad language, normalizes male-female relationships before marriage, and encourages the consumption of intoxicants such as alcohol. While Mulims wear modest clothing (for both males and females), shun the use of bad language, have only professional interactions between genders before marriage, and forbid the use of any intoxicants. Etc.

In order to face this reality, precautions must be taken at different stages of an individual’s life. In a person’s childhood, parents should aspire to raise them to have conviction in their religion. Part of this is enforcing values and morals in their child when still young. In adolescence, youth are the most influenced by their peers. In response, youth should search for friendship groups who share the same religion, so together they can create a support group. Lastly, an individual should implement different methods to enable himself to be independent from others. Whether by taking control of one’s own life, holding onto individuality, or telling others of one’s commitment, finding a way to differentiate oneself from societal expectations is crucial.

Muslim youth should not yearn to fit into norms; instead they should celebrate themselves and learn to love Islam in order to be unapologetically Muslim in the face of society. “So rely upon Allah ; indeed, you are upon the clear truth.” (Surah Naml, Ayah 79)

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