

Social Norms, Moral Judgments, and Irrational Parenting

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We are all conformists, whether we admit it or not. It's part of our human nature. We couldn't form and live in human societies if we weren't conformists. To a considerable degree, **conformity** is a good thing.

Social psychologists commonly describe two primary reasons for conformity. One reason has to do with information and pragmatics. If other people cross Bridge A and avoid Bridge B, they may know something about the bridges that we don't know. To be safe, we had better stick with Bridge A too. A great advantage of living in society is we don't have to learn everything by trial and error. We don't have to try crossing Bridge B and have it collapse on us in order to learn to avoid it. We just look and see that other people avoid B and that those on A are surviving, so we take A too. This kind of social influence is referred to by social psychologists as **informational** influence.

The other general reason for conformity is to promote group cohesion and be accepted by others in the group. We depend for our survival and wellbeing on membership in social groups, whether they be bands, tribes, nations, friendship groups, or work groups. Social groups can exist only if some degree of behavioral coordination exists among the group members. Conformity allows a group to act as a coordinated unit rather than a set of separate individuals. We tend to adopt the ideas, myths, and habits of our group because doing so generates a sense of closeness to others, promotes our acceptance by them, and enable the group to function as a unit. We all cross Bridge A because we are the Bridge A people, and proud of it! If you cross Bridge B you may look like you don't want to be one of us, or you may look strange and therefore possibly dangerous to us. Social influence that works through each person's desire to be part of a group or be approved of by the group is called **normative** influence.

This is all well and good, but sometimes our strong human tendency to conform can cause us to say or do things that objectively don't make any sense. They may be things that are downright silly, or in some cases even downright tragic.

Solomon Asch's classic experiments on conformity in the laboratory

Let's start with silly before moving to tragic. Here's an example from a classic series of experiments conducted by social psychologist Solomon Asch in the 1950s.

Asch's (1956) procedure was as follows: A college-student volunteer was brought into the lab and seated with six to eight other students, and the group was told that their task was to judge the lengths of lines. On each trial they were shown one standard line and three

comparison lines and were asked to judge which comparison line was the same length as the standard. As a perceptual task, this was absurdly easy; one comparison line was clearly the same length as the standard and the other two were clearly different in lengths. In previous tests, subjects performing the task alone almost never made mistakes. But, of course, this was not really a perceptual test; it was a test of conformity. Unbeknown to the real subject, the others in the group were confederates of the experimenter and had been instructed to give a specific wrong answer, in a confident tone of voice, on certain prearranged “critical” trials. Choices were stated out loud by the group members, one at a time in the order of seating, and seating had been arranged so that the real subject was always the next to last to respond. The question of interest was this: On the critical trials, would subjects be swayed by the confederates’ wrong answers?

Of more than 100 subjects tested, 75 percent were swayed by the confederates on at least one of the 12 critical trials in the experiment. Some of the subjects conformed on every trial, others on only one or two. On average, subjects conformed on 37 percent of the critical trials. That is, on more than one-third of the trials on which the confederates gave a wrong answer, the subject also gave a wrong answer, usually the same wrong answer as the confederates had given.

In subsequent research, Asch showed that the primary reason for conformity in this case was normative, not informational. When the experiment was varied so some of the subjects gave their responses anonymously, in such a way that others didn’t hear their judgment, there was much less conformity. They were much more likely to choose the correct line when nobody would know what they had chosen. If everyone around you insists that black is white, it takes considerable courage (or maybe foolishness?) for you to say, out loud, “No, that’s black, not white.”

Chinese foot binding: A social norm that lasted a thousand years

Every culture has social norms, which people follow largely because of the negative consequences of appearing different. Generally, most such norms are benign, but some are harmful, even cruel. An example of the latter is Chinese foot binding.

For roughly a thousand years, beginning in the 10th century and ending in the 20th, girls in China were routinely crippled by a process of binding their feet. Beginning typically between age 4 and 6, girls’ feet were bound tightly, with increasingly tight wrappings. The binding process involved deliberately breaking the bones of the toes and other bones in the feet, and curling the broken toes underneath, so the feet grew to look more like a hoofs than like feet. The binding was done by the girl’s mother or by a woman chosen by the mother. The goal was feet no longer than 3 Chinese inches (4 US inches), which would fit within tiny silk slippers. The whole process was extremely painful and had the effect of crippling the girls. Throughout their lives they would have to walk in a mincing manner that

was viewed in China at that time as the height of femininity. The process also often resulted in infections, such that many girls and women died of gangrene.

Historians suggest that this practice began, in the 10th century, when Emperor Li Yu became entranced by one of his concubines who bound her feet and danced seductively on her toes (Foreman, 2015). Other court ladies then began to bind their feet, and gradually the practice spread and became increasingly extreme. By the mid-17th century the practice was so widespread that nearly all girls and women, throughout China, had tiny hoof-like feet (Schiavenza, 2013). The only ones who didn't were daughters in very poor families, especially among the ethnic Hakka people, where girls and women needed to work in fields or on boats at jobs that would be impossible with bound feet. Unbound feet became, therefore, a sign of being lower class, unfit for marriage to a man who was not of the lowest class himself.

At various times over the course of this thousand-year history campaigns were organized to try to do away with foot binding, but the social norm was so powerful that the campaigns were generally unsuccessful. It wasn't until the 19th century, with exposure to Western ideas, that upper class women began to stop binding their daughters' feet, which led finally, by the early 20th century, to the extinction of this cultural practice completely.

Social norms affecting parenting practices in our culture today

We don't bind our children's feet, but there are other ways in which we interfere with our children's development. Children are by nature designed to develop physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually largely through self-directed play and exploration with other children. Throughout most of human history, except for times and places of slavery or intensive child labor, children spent large portions of their time playing and exploring with other children away from adults. This was their major source of joy and their natural way of learning how to function as independent, responsible, competent human beings. As recently as thirty or forty years ago it was still standard practice for parents to shoo children out of the house, where they would find other children and play to their hearts' content. Over the last few decades, however, in the United States and many other nations, social norms have gradually developed that prevent such play. As I have argued elsewhere (e.g. [here](#) and [here](#)), there are good reasons to believe that these norms of restricting children's freedom are a major cause of the record levels of depression, anxiety, various other psychological disorders, and suicide among young people today. I'm not sure that depriving children of play is less cruel than binding their feet.

Today, strong social pressures work against any parent who understands the value of free, unsupervised play and exploration for her children. Here, paraphrased, is the kind of statement that I have heard from many parents (for many examples of actual cases, see Lenore Skenazy's website):

"I know that my child needs free play, away from adults, to develop optimally. I know the data indicating that lack of such play can have crippling effects on social and emotional development. I know that the realistic dangers of such play are very small and the advantages are great. But such play is impossible today. Because other parents aren't letting their children out to play, there's nobody out there for my child to play with, so he just comes back inside. Or, if he is outside by himself or with another child, playing or walking anywhere outside of our yard, there's a good chance that someone will report this to Child Protective Services or the police. Even if nobody does report it, I sense the negative judgments of other parents, who view me as negligent for not always supervising my child."

Social norms sometimes take the form of moral imperatives, and when that happens it's especially difficult for people to violate them. Moral judgments cloud and trump common sense. If a practice is perceived as immoral, it is perceived as wrong even if evidence and logic would dictate that the practice is beneficial. Our current norm of extreme protection of children has become, unfortunately, not just a social norm, but a moral norm. If you don't watch your child (or have some other responsible guard watching) every minute, you are, in the eyes of many people, doing something immoral.

Recently, researchers at the University of California, Irvine, published an article illustrating how moral judgments can cloud our reasoning (Thomas et al., 2016). In their study, more than 1,500 adult participants, from various backgrounds, read stories in which a child was left alone for some period of time. For example, in one story an 8-year-old was left reading a book for 45 minutes in a coffee shop a block away from her parent. After each story, the participant was asked to rate on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest) the degree of danger the child was in while the parent was away.

Remarkably, the most common danger rating for every story was 10—the most extreme danger possible—and the average was about 7. The idea that the high ratings represent, in part, an effect of moral judgment was supported by the finding that the danger ratings were significantly higher when the story indicated that the parent had deliberately left the child alone than when the story indicated that the child was left alone because of some unavoidable accident that kept the parent away. As the researchers point out, common sense would suggest that a child left alone deliberately would be safer than one left alone because of an accident, because in the former case the parent would likely have taken

some precautions about safety or known that the child was mature enough to handle the time alone. The fact that the results were the reverse of common sense indicates that participants were, probably unconsciously, inflating the danger as a way of blaming the parent for violating what they perceived to be a moral imperative—that of always watching one's child.

How can we change this crippling social norm and get back to common sense? That's something I've discussed in the past (e.g. [here](#)) and will, more, in a future post. But now I'm interested in your thoughts and questions. If you are a parent, what social pressures have you experienced that led you to restrict your child in ways that you believed were objectively irrational and not good for your child? Or, if you resisted the social pressures, how did you do so? How might we, as a society, reduce our tendency to judge parents in moral terms and make common sense and real data more salient in our decisions about how to treat our children?

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