

## Conformity among Czech and American Adolescents

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Conformity is generally defined as an individual way to adapt to the pressure of the referent group. The common characteristic of the different conceptions of conformity is that to this process precedes a conflict among the inner strengths of the personality who induce the individual to act according his own opinion and the strengths of the group who force the person to act according to the expectation of the group.

There are two main reasons which produce conform behaviour. Those are informative and normative influences. The informative influence indicates the people give in the group pressure because of the belief of the truth of the opinion which is urged by the members of the group. The normative influence is based on the emotional processes. The reason of the individual conformity is the fear of the consequences, which might arise from the situation when the authentic opinion of the individual is contrary to the view of the other members of the group.

**Aim:** The essence of the research is a trans-cultural analysis of conformity among two groups of adolescents. The prominent goal of the research was to take a look to the phenomenon of general conformity, peer conformity, peer pressure and popularity as well finding how risk behaviour is related to the mentioned manifestations of group behaviour.

**Methods:** To determine the empirical data we used the following research methods: peer pressure, peer conformity, popularity and general conformity scale by Santor, Messervey and Kusumakar and a scale of risk behaviours of adolescents, which was created in agreement with the US Youth Risk Behaviour Surveillance System.

**Results:** According to the statistical analysis we found out that between the Czech and American adolescents there is no significant difference in perceiving the group pressure. Men from both groups perceive the group pressure more than the girls. The other results showed that the American adolescents have bigger interest to be popular among the peers. Talking about conformity, for the American adolescent is typical noticeable submissivity to the adult authorities and their demands. On the other hand the Czech adolescents incline to peer conformity and risk behaviour while their desire to be popular is lower. However the peer conformity refers more to the Czech girls because the comparison of the results among the men didn't show any differences.

**Conclusion:** The comparison of the result among the adolescents of a different sex has shown some interesting information. The statistical analysis showed that men perceive the peer pressure more than the girls. The young men are predisposed to the risk activities than the young girls. We understand that as a manifestation of identification of the young men with the adults while the often experiment with situations and activities marked as risk like alcohol, smoking etc. On the other hand the girls are more submissive than the men which can explain the presence and the domination of the both phenomenon of conformity, peer conformity and general conformity.

### KEY WORDS

conformity, group pressure, popularity, risk behaviour

## INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this paper is to analyse conformity among adolescents. Conformity is generally defined as an individual way of adapting to the pressure of a reference group. A broader concept of conformity, which is advocated for example by E. Fromm, involves the same process, but here an individual adapts to institutions or wider and less structured groups of people (2). The common characteristic of various concepts of conformity is that this process is preceded by a conflict between the inner forces of a personality, which instigate the individual to act according to his/her own convictions, and outer forces, which make the individual act according to the expectations of the group (3,4).

Professional literature mentions two principal causes of conformist behaviour. These are information and normative influences. The information causes suggest that people succumb to group pressure as a result of their conviction of the truthfulness of a certain statement or opinion, which is enforced by other members of the group. Therefore, this is a cognitive principle of the process of an individual's identification with the opinion of the group. Normative influences are based on emotional processes. The reason for individual conformity is fear from consequences that might arise from a situation when an individual's opinion is contrary to the opinion of other members of the group (5, 6, 7, 8).

Both of these psychological mechanisms lead to the origination of two types of conformity. The first type, which is based on the information approach, is known as private or real conformity. It is basically a positive dynamic process between an individual and a group, in which the person fully accepts and internalizes the opinions, requirements and norms of the group. The group's opinion, norm or value is accepted by the individual in a way that it becomes a part of the individual's subjective conviction. The second type of conformity, which is associated with a person's emotional processes and his/her efforts to ensure own psychophysiological balance, is called public or practical conformity. Public conformity is behaviourally different from private conformity in that an individual manifests a change of his/her own behaviour only superficially; at the same time the individual retains his/her own intimate opinion and conviction (9, 5, 6, 7, 10).

Conformity represents a specific response of an individual to the pressure of the social environment and initiates a series of psychological and behavioural states. The origination of conformist behaviour is supported by a number of personality and social factors. One of them is the size of the group. The bigger the

group, the stronger the group pressure on an individual; this results in an increase in conformist behaviour. Another factor of an individual's conformity is the composition of the group. An important aspect is whether an individual is a person advocating the leading position or opposition, the individual's group status, and problem solving competences. Another important aspect is whether the group consists of known people or friends, or anonymous individuals. An individual has fewer concerns to express his/her own opinion in a group of friends.

Adolescence is a potentially critical period for an easy origination of risk and problem behaviour. A frequent motivational background of risk behaviour in adolescence include a need for recognition by peers, confirmation of own value, especially independence, fearlessness and strength, defiance of authority, social constraint, etc. (11, 7, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17).

## OBJECTIVES

The main objective of the research was to identify the degree of general conformity, peer conformity, peer pressure and popularity, as well as to determine how risk behaviour in adolescence is associated with group behaviour.

The implicit background of these objectives is the conviction that the research will help reveal the influence of age, gender and cultural membership on the associations between conformity and risk behaviour in adolescents.

### Research questions:

1. What are the similarities and differences between the samples of Czech and American adolescents when comparing their answers on scales that measure peer pressure, popularity, general conformity, peer conformity and risk behavior?
2. Are there any similarities and differences in these dimensions in terms of gender?
3. What are the similarities and differences between the samples of Czech and American boys in the dimensions of peer pressure, popularity, general conformity, peer conformity and risk behavior?
4. What are the similarities and differences between Czech and American girls in terms of these phenomena?

## METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire aimed at peer pressure, peer conformity, general conformity, popularity and risk behaviour was presented to two samples of Czech and American adolescents.

A precondition for successful implementation of the research was thorough preparation of its stages and their organization. This involved establishing and maintaining contacts with schools, school management and teachers. The schools involved in the study agreed with the research and ensured adequate conditions.

The sample of American adolescents consisted of 1st year students of Covenant State College, Lookout Mountain, Georgia. During our stay at this school we managed to collect questionnaires from 86 students, of which 40 were female and 46 were male.

The Czech sample consisted of 1st year students of Caritas – College of Social Work, of which 58 were female and 40 were male. Both schools have a religious focus and are located in areas with about 100,000 inhabitants. The age range of the student respondents was 18 to 21 years.

The research was carried out in the morning hours in rooms designated for this purpose. The questionnaires were distributed to the students before the beginning of their lessons. The design of the questionnaire enabled group distribution, which resulted in considerable time savings. The average time for questionnaire administration was about 30 minutes.

The questionnaires were completed anonymously. A positive course of the investigation and data validity was ensured by the willingness and cooperation of all subjects concerned, as well as interest and effort on the part of the respondents in the samples.

To determine the planned empirical data the following research methods were used for both samples:

- a) Santor, Messervey and Kusumakar's scale of peer pressure, peer conformity, popularity and general conformity (7);
- b) Adolescent risk behaviour scale developed in accordance with the US Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (1).

Scale a): For the research of peer pressure, peer conformity, peer popularity and general conformity we selected the questionnaire developed in 2000 by American authors Darcy Santor, Deanna Messervey and Vivek Kusumakar. Based on courtesy of the authors, this questionnaire was first translated from English into Czech. We used the method of back translation, where individual versions of the translation were compared with respect to language and cultural differences (7).

The next step was pilot verification and content adjustment of the questionnaire items using 30 Czech subjects; this was a methodological precondition for

final use in the research among selected Czech adolescents. Cronbach's alpha was used to verify internal consistency of four scales. A high degree of reliability between 0.74 and 0.82 was determined.

As a result, the questionnaire consists of four scales indicating peer pressure, popularity, peer conformity and general conformity.

*Peer pressure* was understood as a subjective experience of *feeling under pressure*, being persuaded and encouraged by other group members to perform certain things. This is a subjective construct, whose starting point is a feeling of individual confrontation with a monolithic opinion of other peers to make the individual act in accordance with the opinion of the group. However, the ability to perceive group pressure cannot be identified with a tendency of an individual to succumb to the influence of the majority, which may indicate the effect of a personality trait of submissiveness. The peer pressure scale contains 11 items, in which the respondent uses a 5-point assessment (strongly disagree to strongly agree) to express the degree of own agreement or disagreement.

The task of the *popularity scale* is to distinguish the affective basis of individual acceptance of group pressure, especially the need to gain the affection of significant peers or the group as a whole through agreement with the group. Consistently with the above, the scale assumes a broader framework of hypothetical situations, in which an individual might or might not be directly subject to pressure to act or think in a certain way. In other words, the scale accounts for the so-called idea processes, which regulate the subject to act in accordance with the expectations of the group, which promotes the subject's popularity. The scale contains 12 items, on which an individual uses a 5-point assessment to express his/her own agreement or disagreement with the proposed content.

*The peer conformity scale* contains 11 items and indicates whether an individual accepts the conduct determined or approved by the reference peer group. The authors postulate that the items encourage the manifestation of a latent feature of submissiveness, particularly the tendency of an individual to harmonize own conduct with the reference group. Here, the term of conduct has a broader meaning and includes both pro-social and neutral situations (e.g. participation in social activities, acceptance of a fashion trend, etc.) and problematic antisocial situations (e.g. theft, cheating in exams, drunk driving, etc.) Adolescents already have similar experience and reflect on these subjective contents of individual items. The items of

the scale have dichotomous scoring: if an individual acts in accordance with the peer group, one point is awarded, if a dissonant attitude is taken, no points are awarded.

The *general conformity scale* consists of 7 items determining the degree of individual adoption to important authorities. Unlike peer conformity, there is no effect of normative pressure or a subjective need to become a popular member of the group, but rather anticipation of a certain type of superiority of an important person. As a perceived feature, superiority forms the basis of an assigned authority. An individual expresses his/her own agreement or disagreement using a 5-point assessment with proposed statements.

Scale b): For the purposes of the present research, we developed a risk activity scale. The items were adopted from the American Youth Risk Behaviour Surveillance System, which periodically monitors the prevalence of risk activities among adolescents. The final form of the risk behaviour scale contained 17 items, which indicated various risk behaviours, especially drunk driving, general alcohol consumption, smoking cigarettes, marijuana or using habit-forming substances (ecstasy, cocaine, heroin), and risk sexual behaviour.

### Data processing and evaluation

Statistical data processing was performed using procedures corresponding with the predefined interpretation design. Initial data processing included the calculation of significant values of descriptive statistics, especially the arithmetic mean, standard deviation, analysis of variance and mean error. An analysis of result distribution confirmed normal data; for this purpose the Student t-test was selected to identify the significance of differences between arithmetic means.

The same statistical procedure was used to determine the differences and similarities between the whole samples of Czech and American adolescents and also between the particular groups of Czech and American men and women.

## RESULTS

The objective of the present study was to determine whether there were any differences between Czech and American adolescents in various aspects of group interaction, especially in the perception of group pressure, popularity, peer and general conformity, and risk behaviour.

First let us focus on the similarities and differences between the whole samples of Czech and American adolescents (Table 1).

A statistical test of the significance of the differences between Czech and American adolescents in particular aspects of group interaction did not confirm any differences in the dimension of peer pressure. Both groups experienced peer pressure in the same manner.

The significance of the differences between the Czech and American sample was confirmed in other examined tendencies. In comparison with the Czech sample, for American adolescents popularity is a more significant factor of social conduct. Similarly, a higher degree of general conformity compared with the Czech sample was observed among American adolescents. According to statistically verified differences, American adolescents are more obedient and are more likely to be affected by important authorities (e.g. parents, teachers, clerics, etc.) compared with their Czech counterparts. On the other hand, the Czech group of adolescents is characterized by significantly higher peer conformity, which is also associated with more frequent risk behaviours.

**Table 1** Significance of the differences between the groups of Czech and American adolescents in particular aspects of group interaction

Variable	American group – average	Czech group – average	t-test	Degree of freedom	p-value
Peer pressure	26,87	26,34	0,57	182	0,56
Popularity	29,09	27,03	-1,97	182	<b>0,05</b>
General conformity	26,12	23,33	4,84	182	<b>0,00</b>
Peer conformity	19,33	19,96	-2,68	182	<b>0,00</b>
Risk behaviour	25,41	33,02	-5,67	182	<b>0,00</b>

The following Table 2 presents gender-based similarities and differences in the mentioned dimensions.

An analysis of the tendencies in terms of gender differences (female vs. male – both samples together) generally highlights a higher sense of perception of peer pressure in men compared with women. This higher ability of men for the assessment of group dynamics and associated events is also accompanied by their increased effort to become popular in the eyes of their peers.

On the other hand, adolescent girls tend to be more obedient to authority (general conformity) and at the same time more than men are inclined to peer pressure (peer conformity). Unlike men, young women's experience with peer pressure need not escalate risk trends.

The Table 3 below presents the similarities and differences between the samples of Czech and American men in the dimensions of peer pressure, popularity, general conformity, peer conformity and risk behaviour.

Similarly to the comparison of average values between the whole samples of Czech and American adolescents, it was again confirmed that Czech and American men from our samples were rather similar than different in the perception of peer pressure. However, this consistency is not isolated and is accompanied by a similarly expressed effort of Czech

and American men to be popular among peers. It was observed that American men achieved significantly higher scores on the general conformity scale, while in Czech men a higher degree of risk behaviour was observed, which in this case cannot be explained by the influence of peer conformity. In other words, manifestations of peer conformity among Czech men (compared with their American counterparts) are not so significant to associate them with the registered increase in risk activities. Table 4 shows the similarities and differences between the samples of American and Czech girls in various aspects of group interaction.

Both groups of women perceived peer pressure in a similar way and were also similar in their need to appeal to other peers in the group. With reference to the previous comparison of the two samples of men, another consistent finding is that American girls, similarly to American men, achieved significantly higher scores in the general conformity scale compared with the girls from the Czech sample. This again confirms that American adolescents manifest a generally higher degree of conformity to authority; therefore, they are more obedient and tend to respect norms and rules approved by adults, especially in comparison with our results relating to the sample of Czech adolescents.

In the Czech sample of girls we observed a higher degree of conformity to peers and accordingly higher scores on the risk behaviour score.

**Table 2** Significance of the differences between the whole samples of young women and men in various aspects of group interaction

Variable	American group – average	Czech group – average	t-test	Degree of freedom	p-value
Peer pressure	25,04	28,36	-3,78	182	<b>0,00</b>
Popularity	26,88	29,25	-2,28	182	<b>0,02</b>
General conformity	25,22	23,98	2,06	182	<b>0,04</b>
Peer conformity	20,37	18,88	7,08	182	<b>0,00</b>
Risk behaviour	27,73	31,44	-2,59	182	<b>0,01</b>

**Table 3** Significance of the differences between the Czech and American samples of men

Variable	American group – average	Czech group – average	t-test	Degree of freedom	p-value
Peer pressure	28,30	28,43	-0,08	84	0,93
Popularity	29,89	28,53	0,87	84	0,38
General conformity	24,91	22,90	2,21	84	<b>0,02</b>
Peer conformity	18,78	18,97	-0,53	84	0,59
Risk behaviour	28,54	34,77	-3,00	84	<b>0,00</b>



**Table 4** Significance of the differences between the Czech and American sample of women

Variable	American group – average	Czech group – average	t-test	Degree of freedom	p-value
Peer pressure	25,23	24,91	0,29	96	0,56
Popularity	28,17	26,00	1,55	96	<b>0,05</b>
General conformity	27,52	23,63	5,51	96	<b>0,00</b>
Peer conformity	19,98	20,65	-2,77	96	<b>0,00</b>
Risk behaviour	21,82	31,81	-6,08	96	<b>0,00</b>

## DISCUSSION

To summarize the results of the survey among Czech and American adolescents, it might be concluded that they show similarities as well as differences. It should be emphasized however that these are statistical findings limited by the psychometric nature of the methods applied and by the characteristics of the samples of adolescents in terms of representativeness. Although we strived to provide for parallel research conditions that would ensure reliable and comparable results, we are aware of their relative information value. For this reason, this discussion is marked as probable, because the following explanation is based on well-founded statistical probabilities.

Summing up the average values concerning the perception of peer pressure, we can discuss the similarities rather than differences between the two whole samples. *Czech and American adolescents did not significantly differ in the perception of peer pressure.* This modal perception consistency was also applicable in terms of gender across the two samples: *Czech and American women shared this feature equally*, and also *Czech and American men perceived peer pressure in a similar way.* In our research it was also revealed that *men from both countries were significantly more sensitive to peer pressure compared with women.* A comparison of our results with similar results formulated by Santor, Messervey and Kusumakar (6) reveals a certain discrepancy, as these authors did not report a statistically significant difference in this feature between American men and women. For this reason, our finding that men are more perceptive and sensitive to peer pressure than women cannot be generalized.

In the present research the sample of *American adolescents* achieved higher scores on the *popularity* scale. The average values of the scale suggest a significant social behaviour of young Americans; much more significant than in the sample of Czech adolescents. We believe that this dominant tendency to popularity is associated with a strong social motivation in the USA – to achieve success and high performance. The success and performance motives also affect

the dynamics of the peer group and determine interpersonal relationships between adolescents, as well as the priority of other social objectives.

*American adolescents were also more submissive to adult authority.* This statistical finding is contrary to „common sense“ expectations, and also in comparison with the results of the Czech sample. Although we acknowledge the influence of many factors on a higher incidence of general conformity among the American respondents, we assume that this difference is mainly caused by the legal minority period (in the USA, the minority period finishes by achieving 21 years of age). This practically means that in the USA the period of existential reliance and dependence of adolescents on important adult persons is longer by three years. However, this does not preclude the existence of risk behaviour among young Americans, which is in all adolescents (including Czech adolescents) strongly supported by peer conformity, which according to our results progressively increases with age in American adolescents (see the relevant part of the discussion section on the relationship between the sub-variables of peer dynamics).

The association between popularity and peer conformity was confirmed in both samples of adolescents. However, it is necessary to dwell on the potential impact of the above mentioned context with respect to various cultural and social conditions of adolescents' life. A statistical comparison of empirical data indicates that an increase in peer conformity in *Czech adolescents encourages risk behaviour.* There are numerous potential causes. Due to a lack of evidence we assume that the positive relationship between peer conformity and risk behaviour in adolescents is most likely associated with an increasing need of these individuals to fully participate in the life of their peer group. Achieving this goal depends on the readiness of an individual to adopt existing norms of the group, its objectives and requirements. An individual's compliance is not automatic, usually a degree of tension occurs, both intrapsychic and in the relationship between an ado-

lescent and other peers. To resolve a conflict situation and reduce unpleasant tension an individual has few alternatives. The still attractive peer group will most likely encourage the confronted individual to select one of the possible forms of conformance. We postulate that *risk behaviours are related to private (true) adolescent conformity, while practical (public) conformance manifests rather declaratively through open support of group (including antisocial) tendencies.*

The general finding that *young men have a much stronger tendency to risk activities than young girls* is considered a specific manifestation of gender identification with adult behavioural models. Similar results were reported by Santor, Messervey and Kusumakar (6), whose research carried out in 2000 confirmed that a higher tendency to risk activities in men was associated with their identification with a peer group, while women tended to respect adult authority. As a result, men frequently chose models that represented the traditional prototype of a rough, tough and brave man. At the same time, general inexperience of young people is accompanied by a lack of internal criteria to select between good and bad, useful and useless. The growing need for peer belonging, peer conformity and other dynamic factors engulf an inexperienced individual and are often decisive for the individuals actions. Most common forms of risk behaviour among adolescents include alcohol consumption, smoking cigarettes and various types of delinquency.

A comparison of average data on the results of the occurrence of conformity between genders reveals *dominant peer conformity as well as general conformity in young women.* Although these are rather opposite manifestations of conformity, their coexistence is considered to be a sign of *generally higher submissiveness in women*, which during adolescence makes the tension between peer and general conformity bearable for young women. In the previous interpretation we postulated that in the development of an individual general conformity forms and stabilizes earlier and then acts as a disposition that initiates and models the relationships between an individual, other persons, social group and institutions within the system. Especially among adolescent women the tendency to general and peer conformity merge and together facilitate the complex process of their social adaptation. However, this does not preclude the possibility of an intrapsychic conflict, which would confront the forces of *humbleness* towards adults with growth *tendencies to independence.* If the presence of both confronted types of conformity in young women is confirmed by other independent research studies, this will also confirm the opinion of some psychologists, for example

Karen Horney, that in the contemporary world young women go through a more difficult process of development of psychosocial identity and building a future position in a predominantly masculine society.

Finally, we would like to mention some similar findings formulated by Santor, Messervey and Kusumakar (7), and also Jelínek (11). In their research, the authors of our questionnaire (7) observed a high internal consistency between all sub-scales. The results of their study suggest that peer pressure and peer conformity can be more reliable indicators of future risk behaviours in adolescents than their need to be liked. In other words, the desire to be popular among peers, rather than group pressure, is less dangerous for the occurrence of risk behaviour in an individual. Similar findings were also reported in studies of conformity in Czech adolescents. Jelínek and his team confirmed a positive association between peer conformity and risk behaviour in adolescents (11).

## LIMITATIONS

A certain methodological limitation of our conclusions stems from the nature of the empirical data. All information regarding adolescents' experiences and behaviour reflects their subjective statements, which was impossible to verify by additional procedures. For this reason the conclusions of the present study (particularly regarding the use of habit-forming substances and other antisocial behaviours) should be considered statistically founded indications. Another limitation is the fact that both research samples of adolescents consisted of believers; therefore, the results cannot be generalized to other adolescents.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper concluded that there are similarities as well as differences between Czech and American adolescents in various aspects of group interaction. This applies especially to the perception of peer pressure, popularity, peer and general conformity, and risk behaviour. Between Czech and American adolescents there is no statistically significant difference in the perception of peer pressure, but in terms of gender differences, both Czech and American men perceive peer pressure more strongly than women from both countries. In American adolescents the study revealed a higher need to be popular among peers, they also showed higher conformity to authority, which we believe is associated with the longer period of primary dependence of adolescents, which is represented by the age limit of 21 years to achieve adulthood. Unlike American adolescents, Czech adolescents are more inclined to peer conformity and to risk behaviour.

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