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Follow the Crowd or Follow Your Heart? A Demonstration of Informational Social Influence

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Background: Dramatic examples such as the bystander effect, the Werther effect and doomsday cults often leave social psychology students with the mistaken impression that informational social influence usually leads to harmful or even deadly consequences. Social influence research can be misleading since the information about what others are thinking is often false. This demonstration emphasizes both the adaptive nature of informational social influence as well as its potential downside using genuine information about others' responses. The demonstration can also be used to teach research methods and statistics.

The Demonstration: Before the topic of social influence is presented I distribute two versions of a 30-item multiple-choice general knowledge questionnaire.

- Each question has one correct answer and three distractors.
- The questions represent three difficulty levels as determined by the percentages who answered correctly in a pilot study.
- The control version contains only the 30-items, whereas the conformity version also includes the percentage of students in the pilot study who chose each alternative.

Sample item (moderately difficult, conformity version):

In which country is Alexander Lukashenko president?

A. Lithuania (23.7%) B. Kazakhstan (18.4%) C. Uzbekistan (5.3%) D. Belarus (52.6%)

- I tally the results outside of class and present them at the lecture on social influence.

Typical Results: The conformity group chooses the alternatives chosen by the most participants in the pilot group more often than the control group does. This leads to slight improvement for easy items, considerable improvement for moderately difficult items, but to worse performance for difficult items. This demonstrates that it pays to follow others only when their information is likely to be equal or superior to one's own.

Some points you can make to the students:

- They do indeed tend to use information about others' behavior.
- In easy or moderately difficult situations, it is wise to follow the crowd. However, in difficult situations, without good reason to expect that the crowd's information is equal or superior, it is wise to follow one's heart.
- The information from others is genuine, which can be contrasted with previous research and tied to generalizability as well as ethics.
- The 2 x 3 mixed design can be used to teach research methods and statistical tests for mean differences with both between- and within-subject variables.

Some Cautions:

- My items might not work with your students since difficulty levels may not translate.
- Online versions may tempt students to consult other sources for answers.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or would like to obtain the materials for the demonstration. My e-mail address is eric.hansen@mdh.se