

**Conformity and Punishment: Does Conforming to an Antisocial Behavior Reduce
Punishment?**

Olivia J. Badura

Department of Psychology, The State University of New York at New Paltz

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Olivia J. Badura, Department of Psychology, The State University of New York at New Paltz, New Paltz, NY 12561.

Email: baduraol@newpaltz.edu

Abstract

Prior research has examined the inverse relationship between conformity and free will beliefs, as well as the impact of free will beliefs on punishment severity (Alquist et al., 2013; Moynihan et al., 2018; Pande, 2021). However, there is less information on the direct impact of conformity on punishment. The current study examines the influence of conformity on punishment decisions for moral breaches, taking into account the role of authenticity and free will. More specifically, the study explores if individuals conforming when committing a crime are perceived as deserving a lesser punishment than those acting on their own free will. The study, involving 67 participants who evaluated fictional scenarios of criminal behavior, revealed that participants in the conformity condition recommended harsher punishments, specifically in terms of imprisonment. However, conformity did not significantly impact other punishment measures. Ultimately, the study challenges prior assumptions, providing insights into social influence dynamics and moral judgment complexities.

Conformity and Punishment

Those that conform are sometimes seen as weak and inauthentic (Wice & Davidai, 2021). It is commonly asserted that humans possess the right to act autonomously, often referred to as free will (Shariff et al., 2014). Consequently, choosing to conform and forgo exercising one's free will may be construed as a sign of weakness. However, this belief could vary across cultures as different cultures value different things; American culture tends to value individualism, therefore painting conformity in a negative light (Cialdini et al., 1974).

Furthermore, conformity relates to how we attribute causes for behavior. If the action is based on our own free will or personal beliefs, we are likely to attribute the cause internally, seeing it as originating from within ourselves (Choi et al., 1999). On the other hand, if we conform due to external pressures or influence from others, we are inclined to attribute the cause externally, viewing it as coming from outside forces (Choi et al., 1999). It is important to note that attribution highlights how conformity and our sense of agency are intertwined with the ways we explain our actions and decisions (Choi et al., 1999).

With that being said, the relationship between *conformity* and *free will* raises the question of whether such a perception remains consistent in the context of criminal behavior. Specifically, if an individual conforms to engaging in criminal activities, would they still be deemed weak? If so, does this imply that they might receive a more lenient punishment? The argument follows that if someone did not independently contemplate committing a crime, they may be considered less deserving of a severe penalty.

The current study explored whether conforming in the context of a moral breach plays a role in the degree of punishment one is seen as deserving. More specifically, this study was interested in examining whether young adults who conform to others' antisocial behavior when

committing a crime are seen as deserving a lesser punishment compared to someone who commits a crime on their own free will. These two variables have not been examined together, but previous research has led us to believe that there may be a relationship between conformity and punishment. Alquist et al. (2013) observed a negative relationship between psychological free will and conformity. Specifically, they found that conformity was more common among those with weaker beliefs in free will (Alquist et al., 2013). Weak beliefs in free will have also been associated with decreased severity of punishment (Shariff et al., 2014). If conformity is associated with reduced free will beliefs, and reduced free will beliefs are associated with reduced punishment, then perhaps conformity could reduce punishment by reducing perceptions of free will.

Literature Review

Some prior research has investigated the relationship between free will and punishment. Pande (2021) explored the idea of free will vs. determinism in reference to punishment in the criminal justice system. Pande defined determinism as “an idea which states that every action or event is an antecedent cause which could be physical force, past experiences or physical conditions and therefore, it ought to happen” (Pande, 2021, p. 727). Pande (2021) went on to explain that there are many elements at play, making it impossible for the person to kickstart the chain of events that led to their actions. Further, if the individual was not capable of initiating this causal chain, then they should not bear moral accountability for their actions (Pande, 2021). Ultimately, determinism implies human beings do not have free will and that there are external reasons for certain behaviors, fundamentally challenging the notion of moral responsibility. When it comes to the criminal justice system, most nations operate under the premise that each person possesses the freedom to determine what aligns with or contravenes the law (Pande,

2021). The legal system's practice of penalizing individuals for breaking the law signifies its belief in the capacity of every person to make decisions and be answerable for their actions. However, there are some countries, including the United States of America, that allow an exception to the law (Pande, 2021). Some of these exceptions include but are not limited to insanity, undue influence, and social coercion (Pande, 2021). The question is to what extent does conformity reflect social coercion and influence that may reduce one's moral responsibility?

Past research has occasionally used the words *coercion* and *conformity* interchangeably (e.g., Feldman, 2003; Lamond, 2002; Tourist et al., 2009). There is also past literature that leads us to believe that conformity and social coercion are very similar entities. One article, titled *Coercive Power and Forces Affecting Conforming*, examines the relationship between coercive power and conformity (French et al., 1960). The title itself implies conformity and coercion carry very similar meanings. The article introduces a theory focusing on the interaction between two individuals, labeled as P (the person being influenced) and O (the influencer). It identifies five influential powers: legitimate, coercive, reward, referent, and expert power. These studies revealed that P's behavior tends to align with the directives of O when O possesses legitimate power over P, and similarly, when O wields coercive power (Raven & French, 1960). The article, in a way, implies that you cannot define conformity without coercion being included. The French et al. (1960) article built on previous research and conducted two experiments to examine whether punishment forces and opposing resisting forces both would determine one's conformity. The results are the following: Conformity to coercive power is influenced by both punishment forces and resistance forces, which operate independently of each other (French et al., 1960). Similar to previous research, French et al. (1960) used wording that implies that coercion cannot happen without conformity. Essentially, social coercion and conformity are very

closely linked, with coercion often leading to conformity. With that, coercion reduces free will. That said, conformity could also reduce free will, in turn reducing punishment.

If conformity and social coercion are closely linked, then social coercion could have the same effects of conformity. What may those effects be? One effect observed in previous literature is that there is a negative relationship between free will and conformity. Moynihan et al. (2018) explored the relationship between conformity and free will. They defined free will as “the idea that people are responsible for their behavior” and conformity as “succumbing to external pressures and imitating others’ behaviors” (Moynihan et al., 2018, p. 1). They argued that beliefs in the concept of free will cultivate deliberate contemplation and provide individuals with a sense of purpose. Conversely, the lack of beliefs in free will diminishes the meaningfulness of life (Baumeister, Masicampo, & DeWall, 2009). On occasion, conforming entails a decline in self-awareness, leading to a diminished perception of meaningfulness (Pyszczynski et al., 2004). They conducted research to examine whether the rejection of free will contributes to an augmented sense of meaninglessness and if, in response to this adverse existential perception, individuals subsequently exhibit heightened tendencies toward conformity (Moynihan et al., 2018). Their findings indicated that the rejection of free will led to an increased sense of meaninglessness, and this was associated with a corresponding increase in conformity. Where free will wasn’t rejected, conformity decreased (Moynihan et al., 2018). We see now that free will beliefs can have a direct impact on conformity. However, we have yet to establish if conformity has a direct impact on free will. There is no research that studies conformity as the independent variable and free will as a result of conformity. However, we have seen in research focused on free will that reduced free will beliefs are related to conformity. Perhaps conformity may also weaken beliefs about free will.

If conformity and perception of free will have this inverse relationship, then conformity could reduce observers' opinions of punishment severity through beliefs of free will. Literature also supports the idea that free will reduces punishment. As noted before, Shariff et al. (2014) conducted a study using manipulated free will beliefs and found that weak beliefs in free will have also been associated with decreased severity of punishment. Martin et al. (2017) replicated these results when examining whether free will beliefs predict attitudes toward unethical behavior and criminal punishment. They replicated past research by conducting a global analysis of the link between free will beliefs and moral judgments using data from the World Values Survey (WVS). The WVS incorporated two components to gauge individuals' beliefs in free will. These components involved exploring opinions on whether fate is determined by oneself or predetermined and assessing perceptions of freedom of choice and control. These questions align with established measures used to assess beliefs in free will. Participants also conveyed their views on the acceptability of specific unethical actions and their agreement with the idea that severe punishment should be applied to criminals. The results were similar to previous experiments: If people believe in free will, they are more likely to disapprove of unethical behavior and support harsh punishment for criminals. The results did vary depending on how well a country's institutions worked. They were still consistent with the idea that free will beliefs led to harsher punishments; they just were not as strong in countries with poor institutions (Martin et al., 2017). However, the study still confirmed that stronger free will beliefs result in harsher punishments compared to those that have weaker free will beliefs. If conformity reduces free will beliefs, and weakened free will beliefs lessen punishment, couldn't conformity lessen punishment as well?

In addition to reducing punishment via free will, conformity may also reduce authenticity, meaning how much the behavior reflects one's true character or nature. While in past research this was viewed negatively with a neutral action (Wice & Davidai, 2021), this could be viewed more positively in the case of a moral breach as it would be reducing the belief that one's authentic self is a thief or criminal.

The Present Research

I conducted a study with the purpose of better understanding the role of conformity when deciding a punishment for a moral breach. More specifically, are those who conform when committing a crime seen as deserving lesser punishment than those who commit a crime on their own free will? In the current study, I focused on self-interested conformity, meaning people will engage in actions they would not typically undertake to secure the favor of others and/or vocalize views they do not actually support to fit in with the group (Wang et al., 2012). Along with the independent and dependent variables of conformity and punishment, I also collected information on authenticity and psychological free will. Previous research has found that conformity plays a role in how one's character is perceived (e.g., Wice and Davidai, 2021), which led me to include this variable. I hypothesized that participants in the conformity condition would give the offender a lesser punishment than those in the non-conformity condition. I also hypothesized that participants in the conformity condition would label the offender as being less authentic as their true self is not a thief or criminal. Also, I expected participants in the conformity condition to label the offender as having less free will than the offender in the non-conformity condition. Lastly, I hypothesized that free will beliefs would mediate the relationship between conformity and punishment. In other words, those that believed that the offender's free will was not exercised would give the offender a lesser punishment.

Method

Participants

For the current study, I recruited 67 SUNY New Paltz students (46 females, $M_{age} = 20.35$, $SD = 1.71$) between the ages of 18-24. For recruitment, the current study was posted on Sona Systems at SUNY New Paltz. To incentivize students to participate, they earned credits that would go toward the research component needed to graduate.

Materials

Vignettes

Vignettes were used to describe a criminal theft. Depending on what condition the participant was randomly assigned to, participants read one fictional vignette of someone conforming to a crime or read one fictional vignette of someone committing a crime on their own free will, with no mention of conformity. See Appendix A for vignettes.

Punishment Questionnaire

Following the reading of the vignettes, participants were asked to act as jurors and indicate what degree of punishment the offender should be sentenced with. Upon researching legal actions taken against theft crimes, punishments were carefully chosen to reflect the severity of the crimes committed in the vignettes (Sevens Legal Criminal Lawyers, 2015). Specifically, participants rated the degree of punishment on three domains: imprisonment, community service, and fine (Appendix B).

Authenticity

Participants rated the degree to which committing a crime showcased the individual's genuine and authentic self (*To what extent do you feel that this person's act of committing a crime reflected who they really are as a person (their true self)?*) and the extent to which it

mirrored their underlying values and principles (*To what extent do you feel that this person's act of committing a crime reflected what they believed deep inside is the right thing to do (their values and morals)?*)(1 = not at all, 5 = very much so; Wice & Davidai, 2020; Appendix C).

Free Will

Participants rated the degree to which committing a crime showcased the individual's free will (*To what extent do you feel that this person's act of committing a crime was freely chosen?* 1 = not at all, 5 = very much so; Appendix D).

Conformity Manipulation Check

Participants rated the degree to which the individual conformed to the other person's act of committing a crime (*To what extent do you feel that this person's act of committing a crime was motivated by the desire to be liked and accepted?* 1 = not at all, 5 = very much so; Wice & Davidai, 2020; Appendix E).

Procedure

The current study used an experimental, between-subjects design. Original data was collected for the study through the Sona Systems at The State University of New York at New Paltz, giving us an age range of 18-24. Vignettes were used as the experimental factor, while data for punishment, authenticity, and free will were collected through questionnaires. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: the non-conformity condition or the conformity condition. In the conformity condition, the participants read one vignette of someone conforming to a social pressure to commit a crime. Similarly, in the non-conformity condition, the participants read one fictional vignette of someone committing a crime on their own free will, with no mention of conformity. All participants then acted as a juror, and answered what degree of punishment that they think the offender should face. Participants were then asked to evaluate

the authenticity of the offender they read about in the vignettes. Participants answered on a 5-point Likert scale, if the offender's behavior reflected their true self and what they believed to be the right thing to do. Next, participants rated the degree to which committing a crime showcased the individual's free will. Participants then completed a conformity manipulation check. Lastly, participants answered a few demographic questions (age, gender, and race).

Results

An independent samples t-test was used to examine the role of conformity when deciding a punishment for a moral breach. An independent samples t-test was also run to examine if there was a difference between authenticity and free will across conditions. I also ran a mediation analysis to test whether free will and/or authenticity mediate the relationship between conformity and punishment. See Table 1 for all continuous variable statistics.

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation for All Continuous Variables

	Non-Conformity (n = 35)	Conformity (n = 33)
Punishment (Months of Imprisonment)*	1.46 (2.00)	2.63 (2.39)
Punishment (Hours of Community Service)	24.77 (21.68)	30.18 (22.63)
Punishment (Fine in Dollars)	91.97 (39.68)	98.58 (38.97)
Authenticity (True Self)	3.26 (1.17)	3.09 (1.16)
Authenticity (Values and Morals)	3.26 (1.15)	2.78 (1.24)
Authenticity (Strength of Character)	2.06 (1.00)	1.85 (.94)
Free Will	4.14 (.97)	4.18 (.88)

Conformity	3.47 (1.08)	4.33 (1.02)
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Manipulation Check

Participants' scores on the conformity manipulation check item were entered as the test variable, grouped by condition, in an independent-samples t test. The results showed that there was a significant difference in the motivation of the desire to be liked and accepted between the control group ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.08$) and the conformity condition ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.02$); $t(65) = -3.36$, $p = .001$, $d = 1.05$. The protagonist was viewed as more motivated by the desire to be liked and accepted in the conformity condition than in the control condition. Therefore, the manipulation was effective.

Punishment

An independent-samples t-test was performed to evaluate the role of conformity when deciding a punishment for a moral breach. The results indicated that there was a significant difference between the control condition ($M = 1.46$, $SD = 2.00$) and conformity condition ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 2.39$) on only one of the measures of punishment: imprisonment in months, $t(48) = -1.87$, $p = .034$, $d = -.53$. Contrary to our hypothesis, the protagonist was viewed as deserving more months of imprisonment in the conformity condition than in the control condition. Hours of community service, $t(66) = -1.01$, $p = .159$, $d = .22$; and fine amount in dollars, $t(60) = -.66$, $p = .255$, $d = -.24$ did not significantly differ between conditions. Therefore, conformity only significantly played a role when deciding imprisonment punishments for a moral breach.

Authenticity and Free Will

An independent samples t-test was used to discover if there was a significant difference between authenticity and free will across the two conditions. Their true self ($t(66) = .59$, $p = .28$, $d = .14$), their values and morals ($t(65) = 1.63$, $p = .05$, $d = .40$), and their strength of character (t

(66) = .89, $p = .19$, $d = .22$) were all not significantly different across conditions. Differences in free will were also not statistically significant, $t(66) = -.17$, $p = .43$, $d = -.04$).

Mediation

The Hayes (2013) PROCESS procedure was utilized to test whether free will and/or authenticity mediated the relationship between conformity and punishment, more specifically imprisonment. There was no significant indirect effect of free will, $b = -.004$, 95% CI [-.19, .22]. There was also no significant indirect effect of authenticity, $b = -.003$, 95% CI [-.75, .65]. Thus, neither free will nor authenticity mediated the relationship between conformity and punishment.

Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate the influence of conformity on punishment decisions for moral breaches, specifically focusing on whether individuals who conform to committing a crime are perceived as deserving a lesser punishment compared to those who act independently. While the results failed to support most hypotheses, they still provided valuable insights into the complexities of social influence dynamics and moral judgment.

Firstly, contrary to our hypothesis, participants in the conformity condition actually recommended harsher punishments, specifically in terms of imprisonment, for the conforming protagonist compared to those in the control condition. This unexpected result challenges the notion that conformity leads to more lenient punishment decisions. One possible explanation for this finding could be that participants perceived the protagonist in the conformity condition as more culpable or responsible for their actions due to their willingness to conform to criminal behavior. Interestingly, conformity did not significantly influence the imposition of community service or fines, indicating that the effect of conformity may be specific to certain types of

punishments. This suggests that societal perceptions of punishment severity may vary depending on the nature of the offense and the type of punishment being considered.

Furthermore, our mediation analysis did not reveal significant indirect effects of authenticity or free will in explaining the relationship between conformity and punishment. This suggests that while authenticity and free will are important factors in moral judgment, they do not fully account for the observed effects of conformity on punishment decisions in our study.

The significant effect of conformity on imprisonment but not on other punishment measures underscores the nature of social influence dynamics and moral judgment. It is possible that imprisonment, as a more severe form of punishment, elicits stronger emotional and moral responses from participants, making them more sensitive to factors such as conformity. Additionally, the lack of significant mediation effects for authenticity and free will suggests that other factors may be at play in shaping punishment decisions. It is possible that additional variables not included in our study, such as perceptions of harm or intentionality, could further explain the relationship between conformity and punishment.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged in the present research. Firstly, the study employed a hypothetical scenario-based approach, which may not fully capture the complexities of real-world decision-making processes. Additionally, the sample size was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of our findings. To continue, the use of self-report measures introduces the potential for social desirability bias and may not fully capture participants' true attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, the study focused exclusively on self-interested conformity and did not explore other forms of conformity, which may have different implications for punishment decisions.

Building on the insights gained from this study, future research could explore the role of conformity in various contexts and populations. Investigating how different forms of conformity influence punishment decisions across diverse cultural and social contexts could provide valuable insights into the universality of these dynamics. Furthermore, racial biases and stereotypes could affect how individuals are judged in criminal scenarios, potentially exacerbating disparities in punishment severity based on race. Future research should explore how racial factors interact with conformity perceptions in diverse populations to understand the full extent of these dynamics.

In addition to cultural and racial factors, age and the severity of the crime are critical considerations in the assessment of punishment decisions. Young adults, for instance, may be viewed differently than older individuals due to perceptions of maturity and responsibility. Moreover, crimes of varying severity, from minor offenses to serious felonies, may elicit different moral judgments and punishment recommendations. Understanding how conformity influences these judgments across different age groups and crime categories can provide nuanced insights into the social dynamics of punishment. Lastly, longitudinal studies could examine the long-term effects of conformity on attitudes towards crime and punishment, shedding light on potential implications for societal norms and legal systems.

In conclusion, while our findings challenge some commonly held assumptions about the relationship between conformity and punishment, they also highlight the need for further research to fully understand the underlying mechanisms and potential mitigating factors. By addressing the limitations of the present study and exploring new avenues of inquiry, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between conformity and punishment.

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Appendix A*Conformity Condition:*

Jessie had just started their freshman year at college. They hadn't made many friends yet. Another student a few rooms down from Jessie asked if they wanted to tag along to the local mom-and-pop store, Jessie jumped at the opportunity and joined their new friend. While at the store, Jessie saw their friend quickly shove a few iphone accessories, \$100 worth, into their pocket. Jessie quietly did the same so they'd have something to talk about with their new friend. However, Jessie got caught for stealing the next day when the store looked through the cameras.

Non-Conformity Condition:

Jessie had just started their freshman year at college. They hadn't made many friends yet. Another student a few rooms down from Jessie asked if they wanted to tag along to the local mom-and-pop store, Jessie jumped at the opportunity and joined their new friend. While at the store, Jessie quickly shoved a few iphone accessories, \$100 worth, into their pocket. However, Jessie got caught for stealing the next day when the store looked through the cameras.

Appendix B

What length of imprisonment (if any) do you think this offender deserves? Rated on a sliding scale from 0 to 12 months.

How many hours of community service (if any) do you think this offender deserves? Rated on a sliding scale from 0 to 90 hours.

What fine (if any) do you think this offender should pay? Rated on a sliding scale of \$0 to \$150.

Appendix C

To what extent do you feel that this person's act of committing a crime reflects who they really are as a person (their true self)?

1. Not at all
2. Not very much
3. Neutral
4. Somewhat
5. Very much so

To what extent do you feel that this person's act of committing a crime reflects what they believed deep inside is the right thing to do (their values and morals)?

1. Not at all
2. Not very much
3. Neutral
4. Somewhat
5. Very much so

To what extent do you feel that this person's act of committing a crime was a sign of strength or weakness of character?

1. Sign of weak character
2. Sign of somewhat weak character
3. Sign of neither weak nor strong character
4. Sign of somewhat strong character
5. Sign of strong character

Appendix D

To what extent do you feel that this person's act of committing a crime was freely chosen?

1. Not at all
2. Not very much
3. Neutral
4. Somewhat
5. Very much so

Appendix E

To what extent do you feel that this person's act of committing a crime was motivated by the desire to be liked and accepted?

1. Not at all
2. Not very much
3. Neutral
4. Somewhat
5. Very much so