ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR AND HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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Lesson 14

Social Influence: Conformity

TYPES OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE

1. CONFORMITY
individuals change their behavior to adhere to existing social norms

2. COMPLIANCE and PERSUASION
Individuals change their behavior as a response to direct requests from others

3. OBEDIENCE
Individuals follow direct orders or commands from others (it can be seen a special case of compliance)

CONFORMITY

WHAT IS CONFORMITY

Situations *where individuals change their behavior to adhere to existing «rules» (social norms) indicating how we should behave*

- «**social norms**»
    - norms can be detailed or generic, formal or informal, static or dynamic, **injunctive or descriptive**
    - norms are very powerful **to the extent that they are salient to the people involved at the time the behavior occurs** (this is true even for injunctive norms)
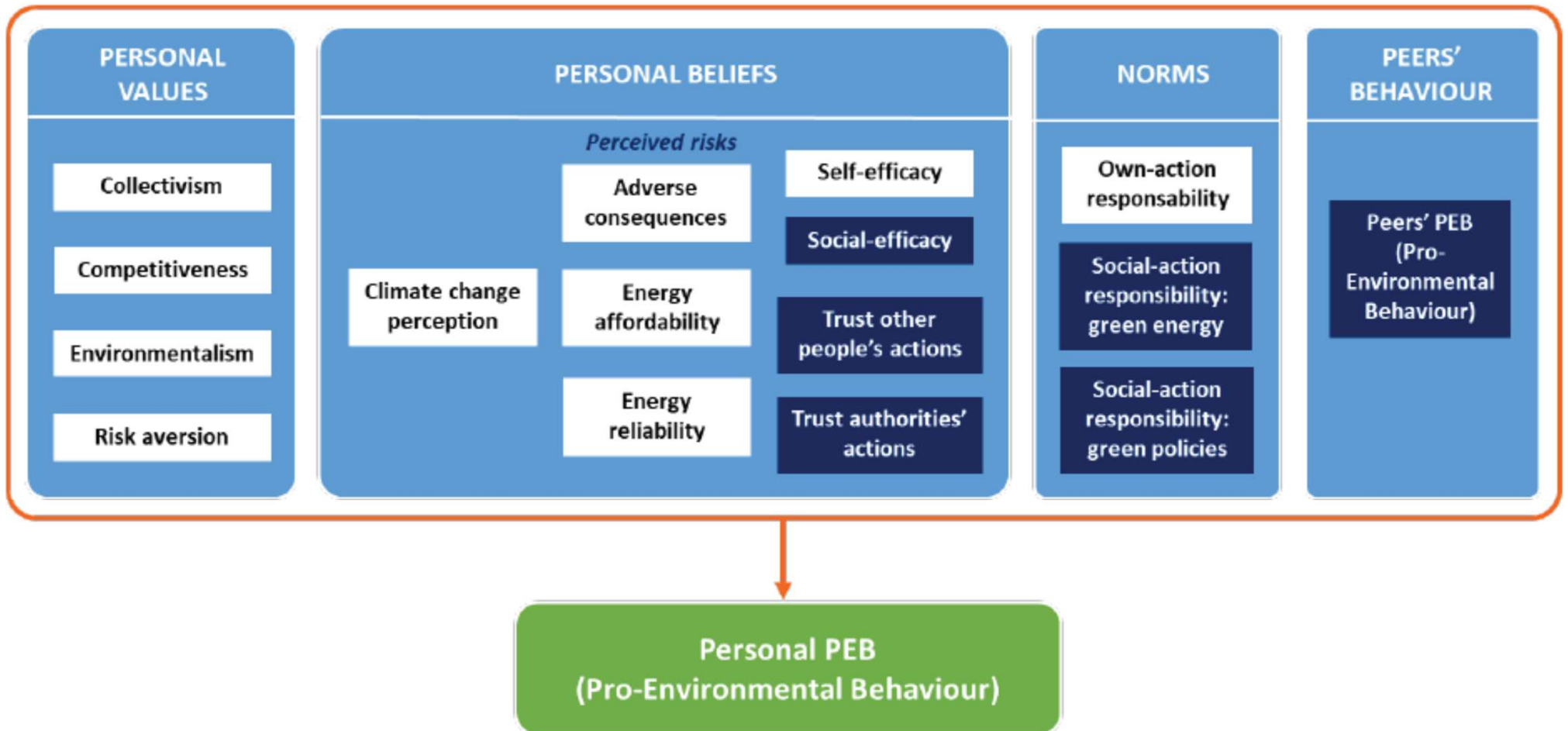
*There are very positive implications to conformity (**predictability, order, cooperation**), but also negative and even dangerous consequences*

AN EXAMPLE: A STUDY ON PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOR (PEB)

– A study in 2016-17 by Ferreira and Wijngaard

- 30.000 individuals in Europe

– QUESTION: do personal factors, social factors (or a combination of both) best explain PEB?

– this is relevant in many ways (for example, for policy making purposes)

The framework of the study

PERSONAL VALUES

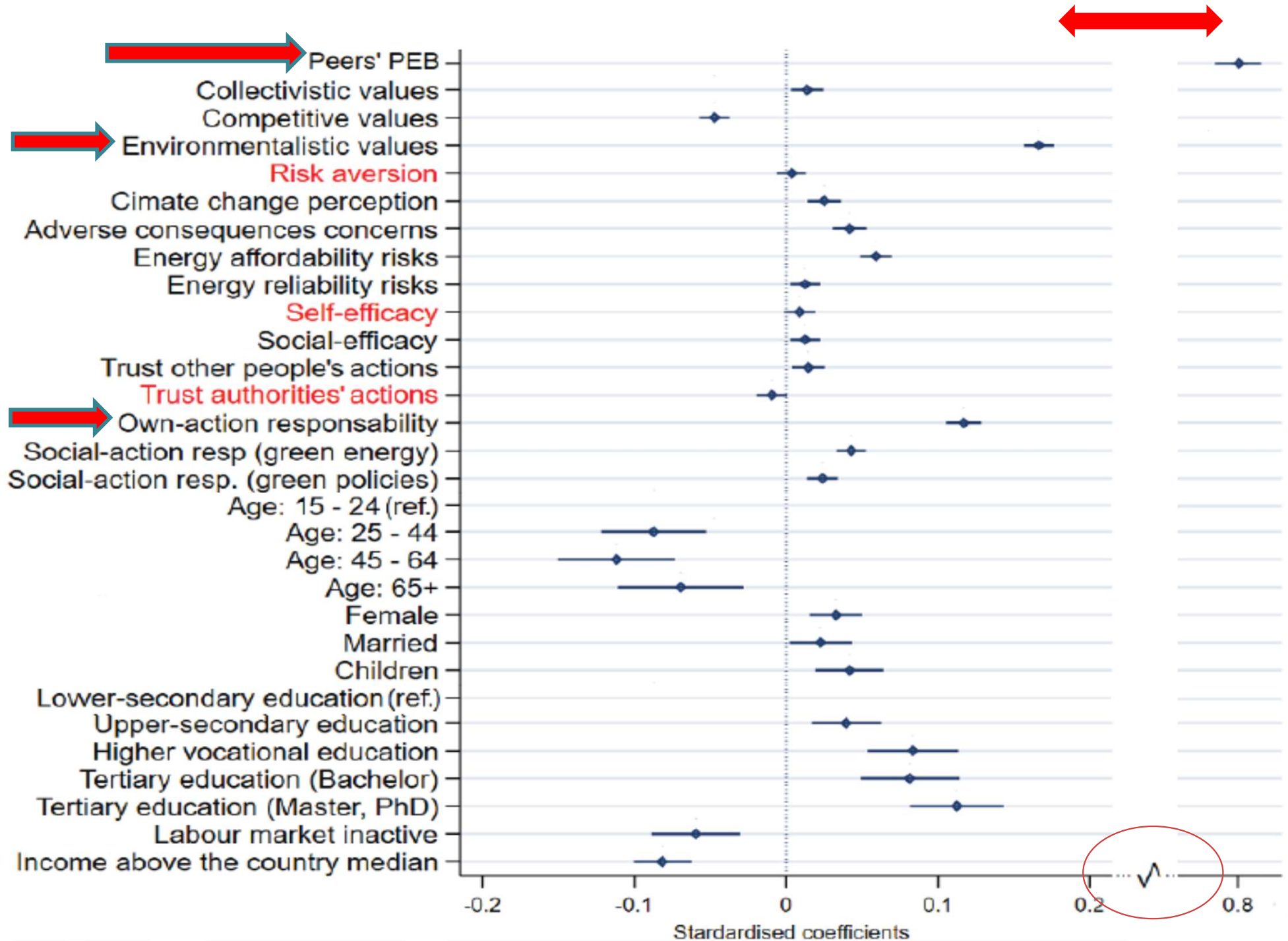| FACTOR	VARIABLE	DEFINITION AND MEASURE
PERSONAL VALUES	Collectivism	Orientation toward in-group and common values over self or individualistic values. It is a continuous index measuring the importance of (1) helping people and caring for others well-being, (2) understanding others, (3) being loyal and devoted to close people, and (4) people having equal opportunities and being treated equally.
	Competitiveness	Preference for achievement and material rewards for success in contrast to the preference for cooperation and modesty. It is a continuous index measuring the importance of (1) being successful and that people recognise personal achievements, (2) being rich, having money and expensive things, and (3) reverse of being humble and modest.
	Environmentalism	Intrinsic preference for ecology protection, conservation, and preservation. It is a continuous measure of the importance of caring about nature and looking after the environment.
	Risk aversion	Preference for uncertainty avoidance. It is a continuous measure of the reverse of likeness and willingness to take risks and looking for adventures.

PERSONAL BELIEFS

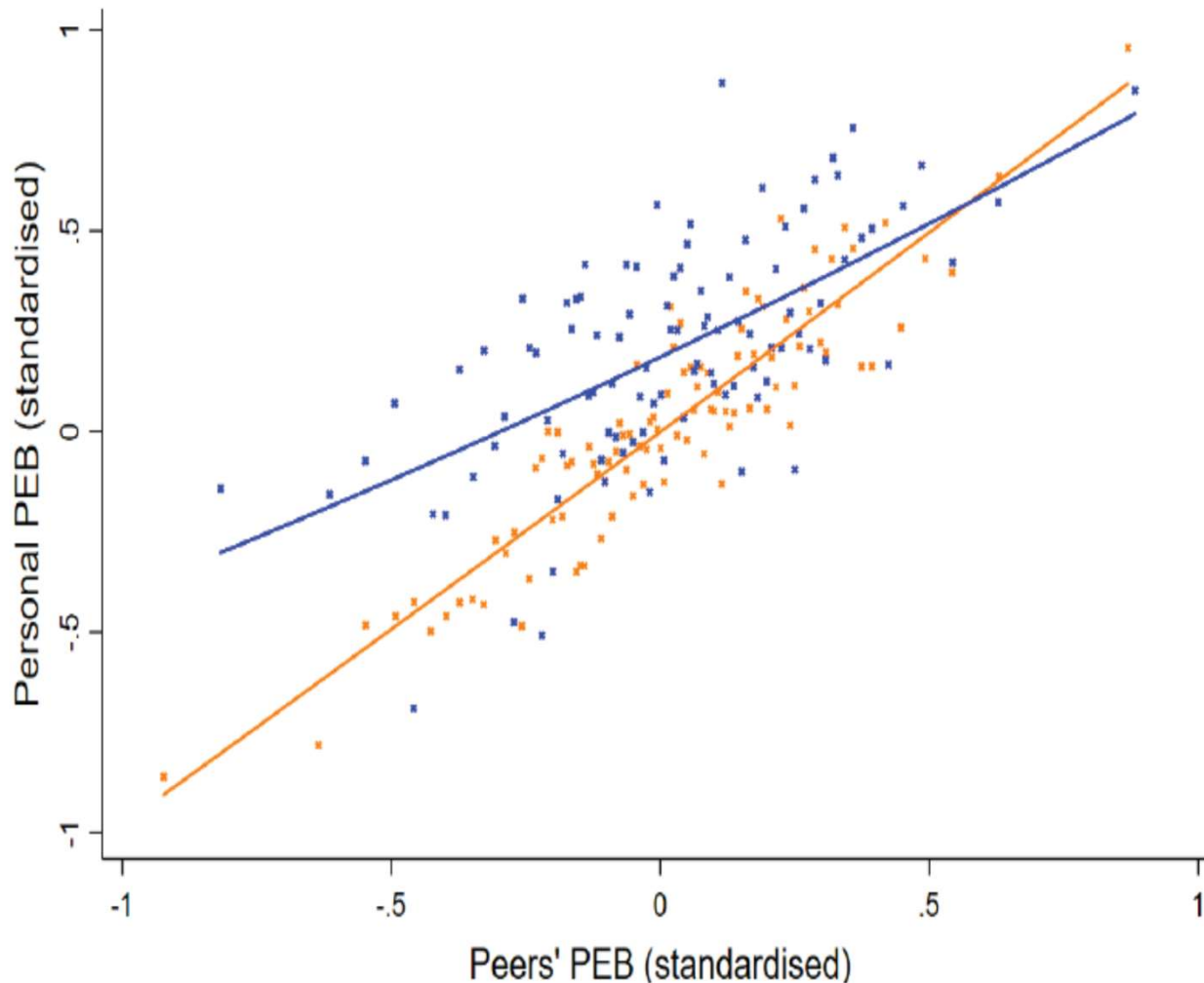| PERSONAL BELIEFS	Climate change perception	It is a continuous measure of the extent to which someone believes that world's climate is indeed changing due to increases in temperature over the past 100 years.
	Perceived adverse consequences risks	It is a continuous measure of the extent to which someone is worried about the adverse consequences of climate change on natural and human systems.
	Perceived energy affordability risks	It is a continuous measure of the extent to which someone is worried about energy becoming too expensive for many people in his country.
	Perceived energy reliability risks	It is a continuous index measuring the extent to which someone is worried about his country being too dependent on (1) energy imports, (2) using energy generated by fossil fuels, and (3) potentially subject to energy cuts.
	Self-efficacy	It is a continuous measure of the extent to which someone believes that limiting his own energy use can indeed help reduce climate change.
	Social-efficacy	It is a continuous measure of the extent to which someone believes that large numbers of people limiting their energy use could indeed reduce climate change.
	Trust other people's actions	It is a continuous measure of the extent to which someone expects that large numbers of people will actually limit their energy use to try to reduce climate change.
	Trust authorities' actions	It is a continuous measure of the extent to which someone expects that governments in enough countries will take action to reduce climate change.

|		
NORMS	**Own-action responsibility**	It is a continuous measure of the extent to which someone feels a personal responsibility to try to reduce climate change.
	Social-action responsibility: green energy	It is a continuous index measuring the amount of electricity used in someone's country that someone thinks should be generated from green energy sources such as solar power, wind power and organic biomass.
	Social-action responsibility: green policies	It is a continuous index measuring the extent to which someone favours the following policies in his country to reduce climate: (1) taxes on fossil fuels, (2) subsidies on renewable energy, and (3) bans on sales of low energy efficient household appliances.
PEERS' BEHAVIOUR	**Peers' PEB**	It is a continuous measure of the average PEB of people similar to oneself in terms of country, region, gender and age.
OUTCOME	**Personal PEB**	It is a continuous measure of the frequency of current behaviours in daily life to reduce individual energy use, related to housing, transport, consumption, etc.

RESULTS

A forest plot of standardised coefficients. The vertical axis lists predictors (top to bottom):

- Peers' PEB
- Collectivistic values
- Competitive values
- Environmentalistic values
- Risk aversion
- Cimate change perception
- Adverse consequences concerns
- Energy affordability risks
- Energy reliability risks
- Self-efficacy
- Social-efficacy
- Trust other people's actions
- Trust authorities' actions
- Own-action responsability
- Social-action resp (green energy)
- Social-action resp. (green policies)
- Age: 15 - 24 (ref.)
- Age: 25 - 44
- Age: 45 - 64
- Age: 65+
- Female
- Married
- Children
- Lower-secondary education (ref.)
- Upper-secondary education
- Higher vocational education
- Tertiary education (Bachelor)
- Tertiary education (Master, PhD)
- Labour market inactive
- Income above the country median

Horizontal axis: Stardardised coefficients (-0.2, -0.1, 0, 0.1, 0.2, 0.8)

an interesting finding

Peer's PEB makes has a stronger influence for people who are LESS concerned about negative consequences of climate change
In other words, social influence may play a particularly crucial role in convincing people who do NOT have strong beliefs about the issue

the effect of social efficacy
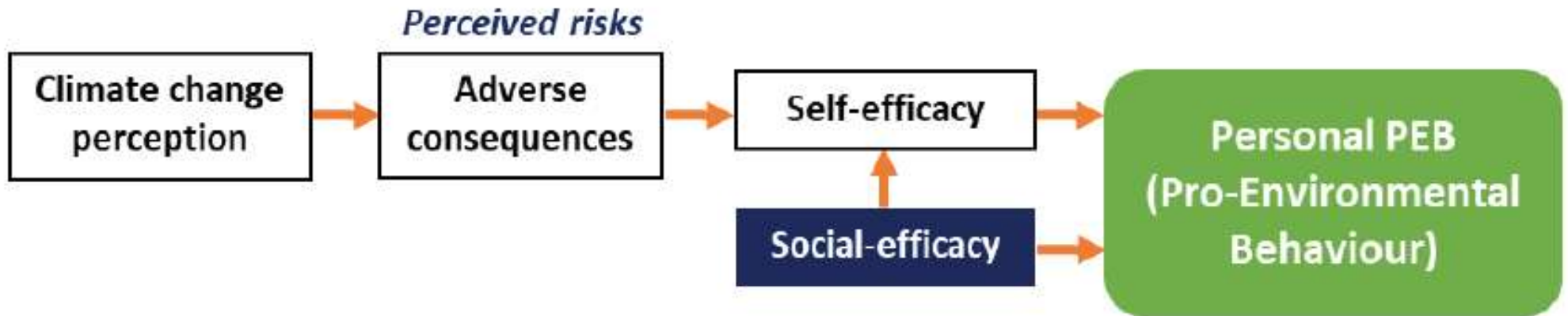
self-efficacy is relevant in increasing PEB, but *only* when when people believe that climate change is real and that there are negative consequences

however, social-efficacy is relevant *independently* of beliefs about climate change and negative consequences

Classic examples of conformity studies

- The Solomon Asch experiments video
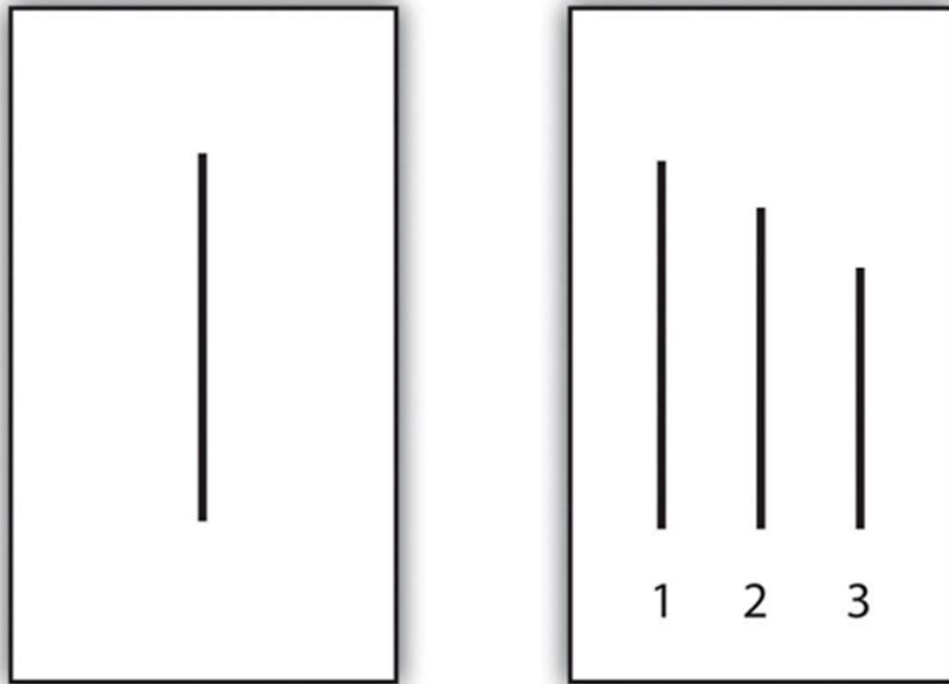
The Asch experiments: original results

TABLE 7.1 **Results of Asch's Study of Conformity**

Measure	Result (%)
How many members made at least one error?	76.4
How many times did the average member conform?	36.8
How many group members never conformed?	24.0
How many group members conformed 10 times or more?	11.0
How many individuals made at least one error when tested alone?	5.0

SOURCE: Data from Asch, 1952, 1957.

Asch-like conformity studies in different cultures

− many experiments in different countries show similar results across different cultures

- Bond and Smith (1996) analyzed 133 studies in 17 countries
- the mean percentage error (conformist responses) is **29%**
- overall, subjects conform between 20% and 40% of the time
- about 25% of the people never conform (in Asch-like situations: that may differ significantly in other kinds of situations)
- there are some significant cultural differences
- people in "collectivist" cultures tend to conform more (on average) than people in "individualist" cultures

How do social norms emerge?

- The Waiting Room example

BIG FIVE PERSONALITY TRAITS AND CONFORMITY

1. Individuals high in **conscientiousness** are less likely to conform to group norms, as they tend to be self-disciplined and prefer to make decisions based on their own principles rather than following others

2. People high in **openness** are less likely to conform, as they tend to be imaginative, creative, and independent-minded

3. People high in **extravertion** are more likely to conform to group norms, as they tend to seek social approval and enjoy social interaction

4. Individuals high in **agreeableness** are more likely to conform to group norms, as they tend to prioritize social harmony and getting along with others.

5. Individuals high in **neuroticism** are more likely to conform to group norms, as they tend to be more worried about negative consequences and may seek social approval / confirmation as a way to reduce their concerns

Also consider that these results are not well established yet, as there are some studies showing different results

Also consider that individuals' response to social norms is always **context-dependent**

In other words, while social conformity plays a very significant role in explaining human behavior, it is not a "mechanistic" rule and **individuals may always behave in ways that are not perfectly predictable**

WHY DO WE CONFORM? (1)

1. **NORMATIVE CONFORMITY (the desire to belong, to be accepted, to avoid social sanctions, to keep groups' cohesion)**

- The behavior of others around us convey social norms about what is the appropriate / accepted / legitimate thing to do to be accepted in that group and / or to avoid social sanctions

- «**doing what others do**», «**be like others**» is often conducive to be liked and, by consequence, accepted

- in fact, «liking (being liked)» is key strategy to induce compliance (more on this later)

- the desire of **cohesivenss** is a particularly significant factor that increases conformity

I know they're wrong, but why should I make waves …

COHESIVENESS

The extent to which we are attracted by a social group and we desire to belong to it, to feel part of it, to participate in it, and to be accepted by the group members

The more we desire to be accepted by the group, or to maintain / increase the cohesiveness of the group, the more we tend to conform to the social norms of the group

Factors influencing group choesiveness:

SIMILARITY of group members
ENTRY DIFFICULTY
GROUP SIZE (smaller size, more cohesiveness)

WHY DO WE CONFORM? (2)

2. INFORMATIONAL CONFORMITY (the desire to be right, to avoid damaging the groups effectiveness, to follow strong «signals»)

The behavior of others around us conveys signals and information about what is the right / rational solution / behavior

- It implies ACCEPTANCE: the subject accepts and internalizes the validity of the «clue» provided by others even if they have different opinions

- It can be seen as a form of «SOCIAL ANCHORING»
- more likely to occur when:
- relative task complexity / ambiguity is higher
- informational signals are stronger
    - majority size
    - status of members sending signals
    - in-group vs out-group signals
    - financial rewards

they must be right, it's 4 of them and 1 of me

GROUP SIZE

from Asch's studies:
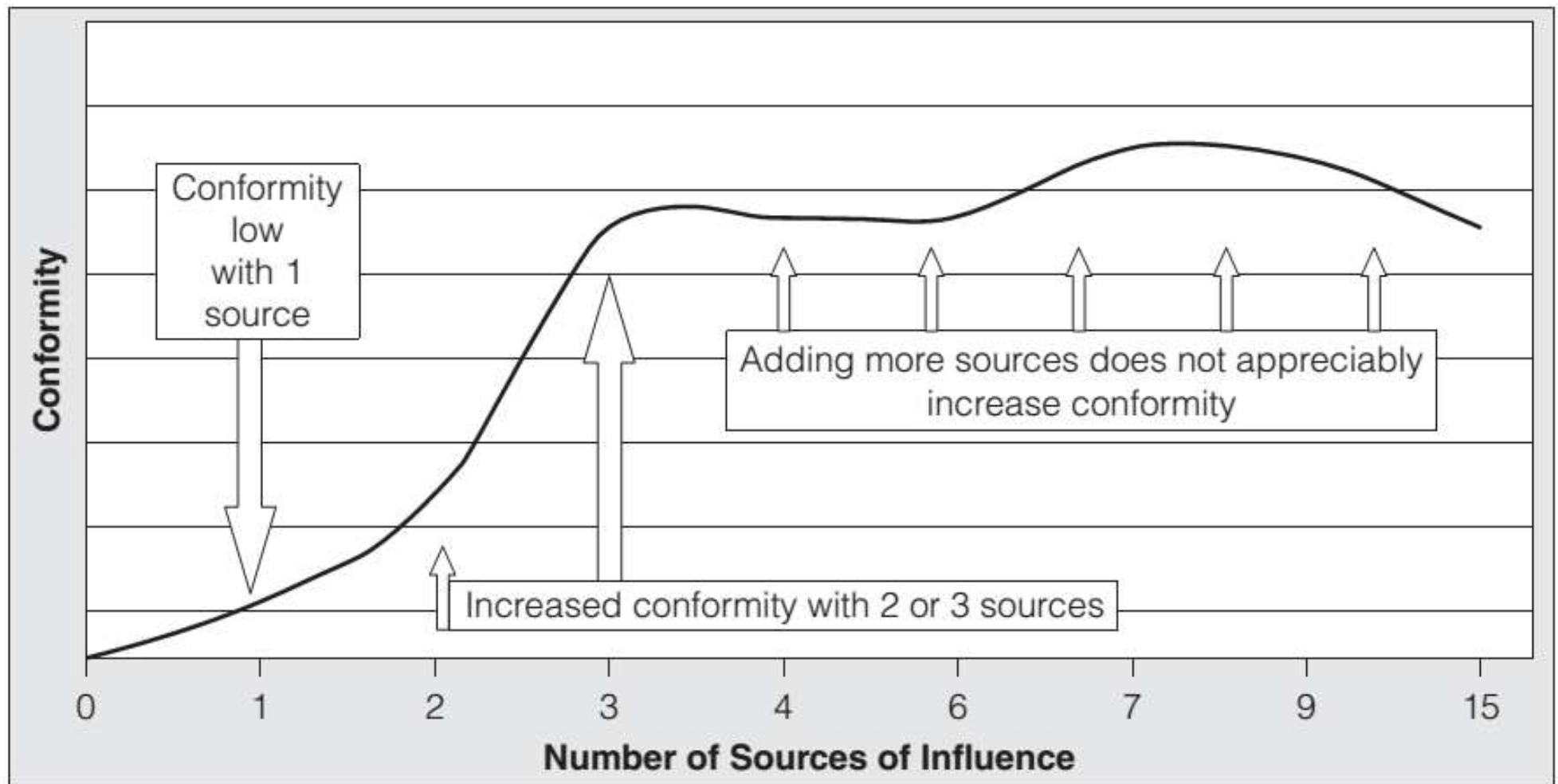
however, recent studies show that the majority size does affect conformity more than what Asch-like experiments suggested

SIZE OF THE MAJORITY

- **THE LARGER THE MAJORITY, THE STRONGER THE SIGNAL**
    - the **underlying principle is not irrational**!
    - The larger the majority, the more I may rationally think that others have better information than me
    - however, in some circumstances, just **the presence of even a single dissenter may change significantly the degree of conformity**
    - **This is not necessarily a negative effect - quite the contrary (as we will see in group dynamics)**

- EXAMPLE: Harrington (2008) shows that the worst performing investments clubs were the ones with affective ties (high social conformity, unanimous votes, little discussion), while the best performing clubs had limited social connections (low conformity, discussion, critical thinking unconstrained by social cohesion)

STATUS

High status members usually feel less compelled to conform
- Status can be perceived as a matter of:
  - seniority
  - hierarchical position
  - reputation

On the other hand, **group members are more influenced to conform to the behaviors of those with higher status**, for two reasons:
- as a more **effective signal** about the desire to be accepted as members of the group
- as a way to conform to strong «**informational signals**», especially when status is derived from a perception of higher competence / expertise
  - more competent people may have better information about a viable solution to the problem the group is facing, so from an informational point of view, it may seem rational to conform more on thier judgments
  - But, as we will see, for groups this may be (sometimes) a mistake

FINANCIAL REWARDS

When people expect a reward for finding the right solution to a problem, conformity changes in different ways depending on task complexity

- **in this case, task complexity can be seen as a proxy for confidence about own judgment**
- **if the task is very simple (like in Asch's experiments), conformity decreases**
  - both 1) a high level of confidence about knowing the correct answer (low task complexity), and 2) the desire to obtain the reward, counteract the effect of social pressures

- **if the task is complex, conformity increases**
  - 1) a low level of confidence about knowing the correct answer makes relying on others' ideas a more appealing heuristic (**social validation**), especially when we received strong informational signals (for example, when «expert» are present or when others defend their ideas with confidence and enthusiasm), and 2) this «appeal» is increased by the desire to get the reward

A FEW EXAMPLES: NORMATIVE CONFORMITY (1)

- You're a new employee in a marketing team. During your first team meeting, the manager presents a new logo design that most team members react to positively—nodding, smiling, or making approving comments.
- You personally think the design looks weak and confusing
- but you say, "Yes, I like it too," to avoid standing out

- Your agreement is driven by the desire to fit in and gain social approval, not by a genuine belief in the quality of the logo
- You're avoiding the risk of rejection or appearing a difficult person.
- You conform publicly, but not necessarily privately.

A FEW EXAMPLES: NORMATIVE CONFORMITY (2)

- You work in a sales department where team members regularly exaggerate product capabilities when talking to clients. You find this uncomfortable and ethically dubious

- But during team meetings and informal chats, everyone jokes about "stretching the truth" as just part of the job

- You don't speak up and eventually adopt the same language when talking to clients—not because you think it's right, but because you don't want to be seen as a troublemaker or outsider

- You're conforming to avoid social disapproval or exclusion, not because you believe the practice is right.

- You experience internal discomfort (ethical dissonance), but maintain the behavior

- Notice the "ethical" component

A FEW EXAMPLES: INFORMATIONAL CONFORMITY (1)

- you're part of a cross-functional project team tasked with choosing between two potential software vendors. You're not very familiar with either product.

- A colleague from the IT department, who is seen as an expert, presents a strong argument supported by data and practical experience.

- Several other team members defer to their judgment, and so do you—even though you had initially favored the other vendor.

- Your conformity is based on the assumption that others (especially the IT expert) have more accurate knowledge.

- You're in an ambiguous or uncertain situation, and so you look to others for guidance.

- The change is both public and private—you actually change your mind.

A FEW EXAMPLES: INFORMATIONAL CONFORMITY (2)

- You're on a procurement team reviewing a vendor's proposal that may involve a conflict of interest—one of the vendor's advisors used to work in your department. You're unsure whether it crosses ethical boundaries.

- Your department head, who has more experience, assures the team it's fine and even frames it as "smart networking."

- Others agree. You follow suit, trusting their expertise, even though you had initial doubts.

- The situation is ambiguous, and you look to more experienced colleagues for guidance.

- You genuinely adjust your judgment based on perceived expertise

WHAT ABOUT ETHICS?

- From "big" crime to many, small, daily acts of conscious micro-deviations from collective (social / organizational) interests
    - the estimated cost of corporate crime (from large scale frauds to very small acts) is extremely large (an old estimate of 1.5 trillion per year in the US)

- In organizational terms: how to align individual goals to organizational goals, for mutual interest

- What do we know about cheating? Why normal, honest people cheat? How much?

An experiment on cheating

- Harvard students
- 50 multiple choice questions
- small $$ rewards for each right answer
- 4 groups
  - Group 1: control group, no possible cheating
  - Group 2: self-assessment
  - Group 3: self-assessment + worksheet shredding
  - Group 4: self-assessment + worksheet shredding + self-attribution of prize

Results

- G1: avg. right answers: 32.6 ← NO CHEATING
- G2: avg. right answers: 36.2 ← SMALL CHEATING
- G3: avg. right answers : 35.9 ← SMALL CHEATING
- G4: avg. right answers : 36.1 ← SMALL CHEATING
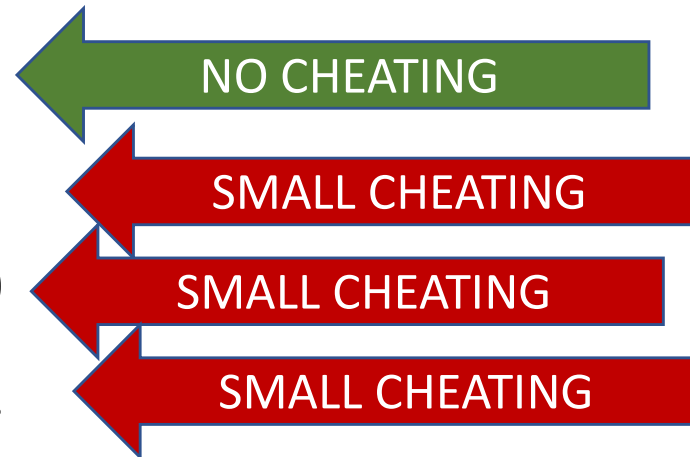
- Differences are due not to a small number of "big cheaters", but to many "small cheaters"
- **When chances to be busted *decrease* (or are canceled) things don't change**
- Notice: honest / dishonest behavior does NOT depend on a rational cost-benefit analysis (otherwise, group 4 would cheat more than the others!!)
- Similar experiments show similar results

Conclusions

- Ariely (2008): the tendency to prefer honesty to dishonesty prevails, but our capacity to self-monitoring and self-control is mostly exercised on "big acts of dishonesty", not on small cheating acts

  - there is a sort of "tolerance level": up to a point, we (implicitly) believe it is acceptable to cheat without any influence on our self-image
  - **unfortunately, "small cheats" are very organizationally and socially relevant**
    - because they concern our daily behavior, the widespread social interactions, the relationship between personal and collective identity, the efficiency of individual behavior in relation to the efficiency of organizational processes

Does social context influence this behavior?

Do ethical components alter our tendency to social conformity?

Conformity and in-group / out-group dynamics

- An «accomplice» makes it clear that it is possible to cheat without any chance to be busted. What happens?
  - **IT DEPENDS ON HIS / HER T-SHIRT !!!**
  - if the subject is perceived as one of the same social group, the cheating level increases
  - if the subject is perceived as one of other (competing) social groups, the cheating leval decreases
    - Carnegie Mellon Univ. vs Pittsburgh University

WHAT DO WE LEARN?

- The social reference (**in-group vs out-group dynamics**) has a *strong influence on social conformity, even on our moral conduct, especially for normative conformity*

Conformity and social identity

- Conformity is strongly shaped by social / group identification
- **NORMATIVE** conformity is strongly tied to in-group dynamics and level of group identification
    - The desire to belong, to be accepted, to maintain cohesion, to associate one's identity to the group membership makes NORMATIVE conformity very salient

- **INFORMATIONAL** conformity is more significant in situations where
    - group identity is less relevant
    - there is a lot of informational trust in group members

- **ANTI-CONFORMITY** is more significant when in-group vs out-group dynamics become relevant
    - «us vs them», «tribalism» etc
    - However, there are other reasons for «anti-conformity» (more on this later)

Conformity and ethics (1)

- The influence of ethical elements on social conformity is very contextual. Conformity may increase or decrease depending on circumstances.

- CONFORMITY DECREASES WHEN:

- The individual has **strong moral convictions** that conflict with group norms.

- The person has a strong sense of **moral identity** (i.e., sees ethical behavior as part of who they are).

- The action violates core values or **professional codes** (e.g., medical ethics, legal conduct).

- There is psychological **distance from group** members (e.g., outsider, low group identification).

- The situation triggers **moral emotions** like guilt, shame, or moral outrage.

Conformity and ethics (2)

- CONFORMITY INCREASES WHEN:
- The group **normalizes** questionable behavior through shared justifications (e.g., "everyone does it")
  - Remember the Wells-Fargo case
- Ethical norms are **reframed as business pragmatism** ("It's not unethical, it's strategic")
- The ethical violation is **ambiguous or abstract** ("gray area" ethics)
- People defer **responsibility to authority** figures or the system (e.g., "I was just following orders")
  - More on this later, when we talk about obedience
- There is **fear of retaliation or exclusion** for speaking out

OTHER FACTORS INFLUENCING CONFORMITY

Factor	Conformity Increases If	Conformity Decreases If
Accountability (Quinn & Schlenker, 2002)	Individuals are striving for acceptance by others whose preferences are known	Individuals are accountable for their actions and are striving for accuracy
Accuracy (Mausner, 1954)	Majority's position is reasonable or accurate	Majority position is unreasonable or mistaken
Ambiguity (Spencer & Huston, 1993)	Issues are simple and unambiguous	Issues are complex and difficult to evaluate
Anonymity (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955)	Responses are made publicly in face-to-face groups	Responses are anonymous and members cannot see each other
Attraction (Kiesler & Corbin, 1965)	Members are attracted to the group or its members	Members dislike each other
Availability of mating partners (Griskevicius et al., 2006)	Individuals are motivated to stand out from the crowd	Nonconformists could be revealed as incorrect
Awareness (Krueger & Clement, 1997)	Individuals are aware they disagree with the majority	Individuals do not realize their position is unusual
Cohesion (Lott & Lott, 1961)	Group is close-knit and cohesive	Group lacks cohesion
Commitment to position (Gerard, 1964)	Individuals are publicly committed to their position from the outset	Members' responses are not known to the other group members
Commitment to membership (Kiesler, Zanna, & DeSalvo, 1966)	Individuals are committed to remaining in the group	Groups or membership are temporary
Existential threat (Renkema et al., 2008)	Aspects of the situation trigger existential anxieties	Situation buffers individual from existential threat
Priming (Epley & Gilovich, 1999)	Unnoticed cues in the setting prime conformity	Situational cues prime independence
Size (Asch, 1955)	Majority is large	Majority is small
Task (Baron, Vandello, & Brunsman, 1996)	Task is important but very difficult	Task is important and easy, or task is trivial
Unanimity (Asch, 1955)	Majority is unanimous	Several members disagree with the majority

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Anti-conformity

- in what situations people react to (direct or indirect) social pressures by not conforming?

1. **people with power are usually less inclined to social conformity**
   - they may be less dependent on social resources
   - research on status and competence perception suggests that individuals in leadership roles or competitive environments may feel pressure to appear resolute and resist to social pressure
     - in order to avoiding looking weak, indecisive, incompetent, or easily manipulated
     - this relates to the phenomeon of over-confidence
   - research shows that this may happen even when people are just primed to think about being powerful
   - we often associate power with the freedom to ignore common social norms

2. **anti-conformity as an explicit strategy**
   - refusing to change one's mind can be a deliberate strategy to signal dominance or certainty
   - aslo research on strategic stubbornness suggests that in competitive or hierarchical settings, people may refuse to concede even when they recognize they might be wrong, simply to avoid losing face
   - research shows that individuals with a stronger desire for uniqueness (or when their sense of uniqueness is threatened) tend to conform less to social norms

Reactance

- Psychological **reactance theory** (Brehm, 1966) suggests that when people feel pressured to change their beliefs, they may resist or even strengthen their original stance to assert indipendence and autonomy
  - in other words, it's **a motivational reaction to perceived threats to one's freedom**. When individuals feel their behavioral freedoms are restricted (**for example, by social pressures**), they become motivated to restore them
  - particularly relevant in clinical psychology and communication
  - the relevance of language and messaging
    - "YOU MUST QUIT SMOKING" (controlling message)
    - "YOU MAY CONSIDER QUITTING SMOKING. THE CHOICE IS YOURS" (non-controlling message)
  - individuals may differ in their natural inclination to reactance (reactance as a trait)
- contextual factors
  - perception of uncertainty
  - perception of being stereotyped
- so, when does conformity prevails, and when reactance prevails?
  - more details when we are going to talk about group dynamics

CONCLUSIONS

- Conformity is a very powerful influence on people's behavior
- Understanding social dynamics is essential in order to understand organizational behavior
- There are general tendencies
- However, there are significant exceptions and contextual factors (individual, envcironmental and organizational) that may change such general tendencies
- It is especially relevant in organizational situations where interactions are frequent and / or consequential
- In the next part of the course, we will show the relevance of conformity in crucial areas like group dynamics, team work, group decision making and leadership

- but first, we need to look at other types of social influence