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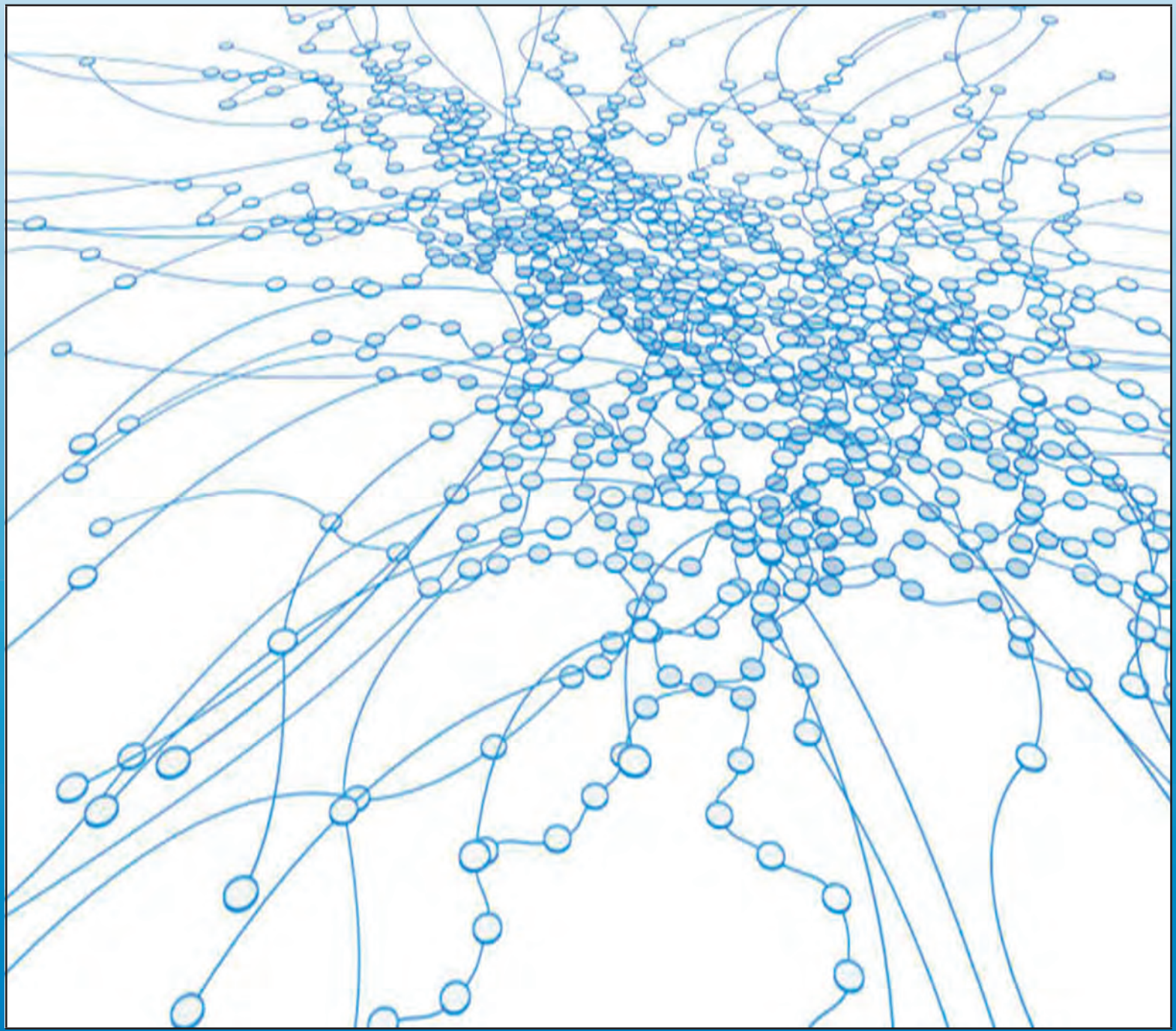

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Brief Reports

Social Conformity in Networks

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Abstract
Centrality in a social network is found to have a significant effect on Asch-type conformity. Friendship affinity and respect social network data was collected on two different groups of actors. The effects of Asch-type conformity were empirically tested on central actors and peripheral actors in each group using a culturally appropriate version of Asch's test. Findings show that central actors are less willing to conform and peripheral actors are more willing to conform than expected in Asch-type social conformity experiments.

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Notes
Thanks to Dominick Lombardi for his assistance in designing, executing and recording data for the empirical experiments.

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1. Introduction

This article reports the empirical results of a series of experiments focused on understanding social network impacts on social conformity. Social conformity is the process of changing attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs to match group norms. Social networks are mathematical models of group relationships. It is hypothesized that individuals' position in the social network of a group may impact their pressure to conform to group norms and beliefs.

There is extensive literature investigating social conformity. The earliest studies of social conformity focused on ambiguous stimulus (Sherif, 1936). Solomon Asch (1952, 1955, 1956) conducted several experiments involving unambiguous stimuli. His experiments required subjects to report their observations of line length in a group where the other individuals would unanimously report wrong answers to selected questions. He found that 36.8 percent of subjects would deny their own observation and conform to the group answers. There is extensive literature reporting on the causes of conformity. (Abrams et al., 1990; Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975; Cialdini, 2003; Cooper, 1979; Eagly, 1978; Eagly & Carli, 1981; Gerard, 1953; Linde & Patterson, 1964; Milgram et al.,1969; Turner, 1991; Williams & Sogon,1984). Conformity experiments have been replicated across cultures (Askevis-Leherpeux & Zaleska, 1975; Avramov-Kiwetz & Game, 1974; Amir, 1984; Chandra, 1973; Huang & Harris, 1973; McKissack, 1971; Meade & Barnard, 1973; Neto, 1995; Rodrigues, 1982; Sistrunk & Clement, 1970; Sistrunk, Clement, & Guenther, 1971; Timaeus, 1968; Whittaker & Meade, 1967).

While Asch type conformity experiments have been extensively replicated, no experiment has specifically investigated the affect of social network position on conformity. Perhaps social network theories and centrality can explain variance in conformity among culture, gender, and group size. The remainder of this paper presents an Asch type conformity experiment conducted on two military groups. Social network data was collected on both groups. Subjects of the experiments were selected based on their network centrality within their group. While the experiments were limited in scope, results and conclusions are presented that provide compelling insight into the importance of social network position on social conformity.

2. Procedure

The affect of social network position on Asch-type conformity was empirically tested on two social groups. The first social group consisted of 20 soldiers in a U.S. Army Military Police (MP) platoon. All soldiers were enlisted and had served between one and ten years in the U.S. Army. Due to various conditions, this population was restricted in an actor's ability to develop a social circle outside the group of actors in the platoon.

The group's leader had collected social network data, recording friendship affinity and respect to better understand informal power within the platoon. The leader collected the data by passing out a list of all members of the platoon with a box labeled "Friendship" and a box labeled "Respect" next to each name. The respondents were given the following instructions, "Place a check in the box labeled 'Friendship' next to those people who you consider to be a friend outside of normal working hours," and "Place a check in the box labeled 'Respect' next to people who you think are squared away." The term "squared away" is a common term used throughout the U.S. Military to describe someone who is highly proficient at their job and displays outstanding military bearing. The social network data were collected approximately six weeks prior to the conformity experiment so that soldiers would not associate the social network survey with the experiment. Figures 1 and 2 show the social networks for friendship affinity and respect, respectively.

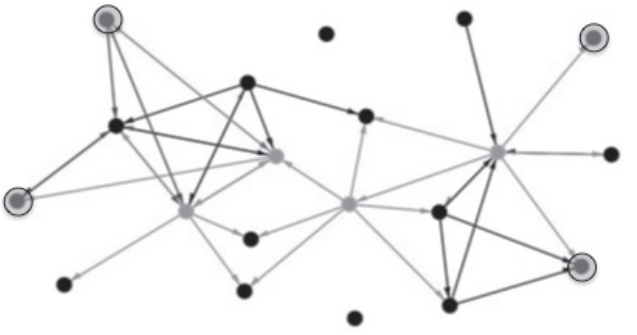

Figure 1. Friendship Affinity Social Network for MP Platoon.

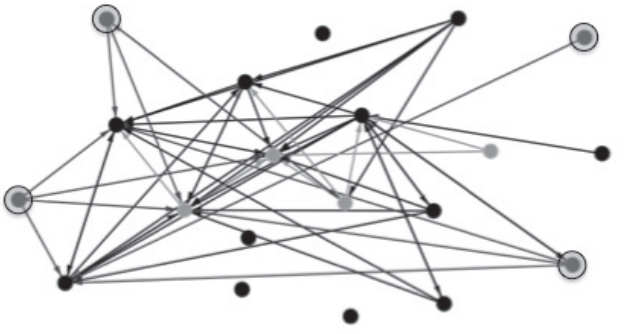

Figure 2. Respect "Squared Away" Network for MP Platoon.

An Asch-type conformity test was devised that would not appear abnormal to the respondents. Rather than asking respondents to report their observation of line-length, soldiers were asked questions commonly used for military promotion boards. In the U.S. Army, enlisted soldiers are promoted to the next rank if they have enough time in service and if they have earned a sufficient number of promotion points, which vary based on the soldier's career field (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2010). The maximum number of points a soldier can earn are 800. Up to 150 points are awarded in a promotion board. A promotion board is convened by senior enlisted soldiers who will ask the soldier a variety of trivia questions that non-commissioned enlisted soldiers are expected to know. Questions may include knowledge of important military regulations, uniform appearance, general orders, first aid and many other topics. It is thus common for U.S. Army platoons to spend time practicing their knowledge in events that resemble trivia drills. Leaders may plan various games or other events to make

studying less monotonous or more effective. It is through this type of forum that the conformity test was delivered.

Forty questions were selected from a study guide for U.S. Army promotion boards (http://www.armystudyguide.com). Unlike most promotion boards, the investigators developed three multiple-choice answers for each question. The author's favorite question was, "When do you place a tourniquet on a neck wound?" Possible responses were "A) Never; B) Only if it is an artery or vein; C) If it is spurting blood". The answer is obviously A, since placing a tourniquet on a neck wound would kill the patient.

The subject of the experiment was selected based on their centrality in the social networks. The centrality values of betweenness, closeness, and in-degree centrality for both the friendship and respect networks were scaled between 0 and 1 and the six values were summed to create a composite aggregate centrality score. The four actors highest in aggregate centrality and the four actors lowest in aggregate centrality were selected to be respondents. Central actors are colored gray in Figures 1 and 2, while peripheral actors are colored redhighlighted with a shaded circle overlaying the node. There were two noncommissioned officers and two enlisted soldiers in each group, which allowed for a convenient control for military rank. The other actors were selected to be confederates of the experiment and provide incorrect responses to 30 out of 40 total questions. The seven respondents who were not participating in a current iteration of the conformity test were assigned other military details so they would have a legitimate reason to be away from the group conducting the conformity experiment. The respondent and confederates of the experiment sat in a conference room around a long table. The platoon leader provided the following instructions,

> *"Today we will be preparing soldiers for the upcoming promotion board. In my psychology class, we have been studying memory and it is more difficult to learn answers to board questions when there are no clues or choices. I know that there are no multiple-choice answers in the board, but we are going to try preparing with multiple-choice questions to see if it helps soldiers learn answers better. This is how this will work: I am going to show you a question on a power point slide with three multiple-choice answers. I will read the questions and the answers out loud. You will then take turns answering the questions out loud. I will write down your answers. In order for me to test whether this approach works, it is important that you do not answer the question out of turn. You cannot make any comments about other soldiers' answers either. Are there any questions before we begin?"*

The platoon leader recorded the number of incorrect responses that the respondent gave in order to conform to the group. There were no questions where the respondent provided an incorrect response following correct responses from the confederates. In all cases where a respondent provided an answer that was different from the group, was for an incorrect response by the group. This may be due to the difficulty level of the questions asked. For two of the central actors, they were outspoken and questioned the confederates' intelligence based on their responses. The platoon leader had to keep reminding them to be quiet during the activity. The other two central actors looked visibly concerned by the incorrect responses to questions, but refrained from responding.

The experiment had several additional design features to ensure that it was conducted smoothly, especially since a single failure on a trial could potentially be communicated throughout the group and bias the entire experiment. The power point slides where soldiers were intended to provide an incorrect response had a slight variation in the logo that appeared in the upper left corner of the power point slide. This ensured that the confederates of the experiment knew when they were supposed to provide an incorrect response. The platoon leader conducted a rehearsal, going through all 40 questions with the confederates so that they understood how the experiment was to be conducted and gave them a chance to laugh at some of the more humorous incorrect responses prior to seeing it when the respondent did. The questions were randomized for each trial. The platoon leader was able to complete all trials on eight respondents within one day. None of the respondents had any contact with other respondents until after completion of the experiment.

The other group consisted of a platoon of 31 cadets in a military academy. The military academy provided the cadets an undergraduate college education and military training. Graduates earn a bachelor degree and a commission in the U.S. military. This platoon attended diverse classes and members pursued different academic majors throughout the day. They conducted military training on selected weekends and lived in the same dormitory. Promotion is based on the class year and to create leadership opportunities, therefore, rank is not permanent and promotion boards are not conducted. Social network data for friendship affinity and respect were collected on the cadet platoon approximately one week prior to the conformity experiment using the same protocol as for the MP platoon.

The cadet platoon leader administered the conformity test to the platoon using the same basic protocol and design as for the MP platoon. Unfortunately, cadets do not participate in promotion boards, nor does military trivia provide any benefit for advancement. Thus, it is highly uncommon for cadets to conduct an activity similar to the experiment. The instructions to respondents were altered slightly,

> *"When you are commissioned your soldiers will have to prepare for promotion boards in order to advance. Good officers care about their soldiers. In my experimental psychology class we are studying memory. I am conducting a study to determine methods for increasing a soldier's ability to learn the military knowledge necessary for advancement. I am going to show you questions on power point slides with three multiple choice answers. I will read the questions out loud. You will then take turns answering the questions out loud. I will write down your answers. It is important that you do not answer questions out of turn to prevent bias in the experiment. It is also important that you do*

not make any comments about other soldiers' answers. Are there any questions before we begin?"

Figures 3 and 4 show the friendship and respect networks, respectively, for the cadet group. Gray colored nodes are central actors and highlighted-shaded nodes are the peripheral actors. Only five subjects were included in this series of experiments. The other intended subjects either became aware of the experiment or were unavailable at the last minute. In addition, four of the most central actors were unavailable to serve as subjects of the experiment.

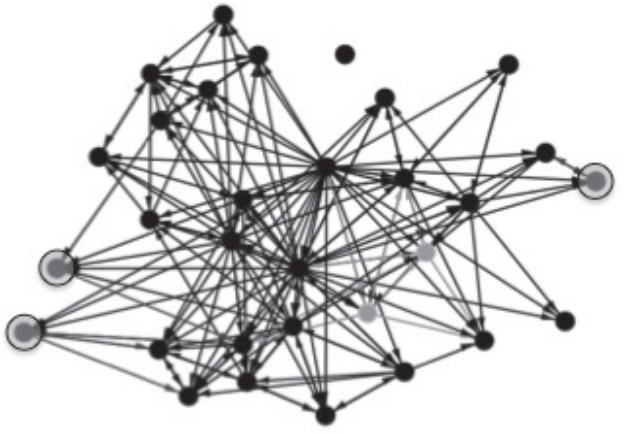

Figure 3. Friendship Affinity Social Network for Cadet Platoon.

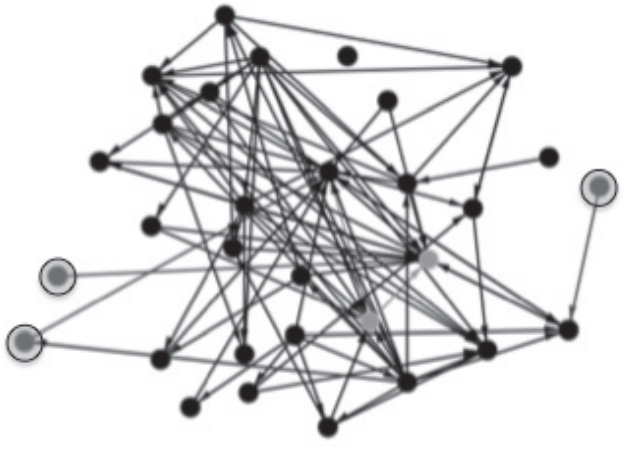

Figure 4. Respect "Squared Away" Network for Cadet Platoon.

Approval for these experiments was obtained by the appropriate U.S. Army Internal Review Board (IRB) for ethical treatment of subjects in a human experiment. Following the experiment, all subjects were debriefed on the experiment. It was important to review the questions where incorrect responses were given to make sure that soldiers were not misinformed regarding information that could affect their promotion and possibly cause them to render improper first aid in an emergency. For the MP soldiers, their performance on the subsequent promotion board was monitored closely. Three subjects would not participate in a promotion board because they had either left the military, or successfully completed their last promotion board for advancement. Four subjects performed better on the following promotion board than they did on their previous promotion board at the earlier rank. One subjects' performance on the promotion board was not observed.

None of the subjects or confederates were told that social network data was used in the experiment. They were not told that some actors were highly central to the group and others were peripheral. It was the opinion of the IRB that making respondents aware of their position in the platoon's social network my have adverse effects on their personal self esteem, especially if it had an effect on the subjects' responses.

Informal discussions with platoon members following the experiments revealed very different opinions on how successfully the experiments were performed. The MP platoon subjects did not suspect that they were participating in a conformity experiment. Two of the highly central subjects believed that something was unusual based on the responses of group members to certain questions, but they did not think that they were the subjects of an experiment. The cadet platoon, in contrast, knew that something was unusual almost immediately. They knew that their platoon leader was conducting the experiment primarily for a psychology class and that it had nothing to do with the military. Many suspected that it had something to do with the platoon's social network collected a week prior. Furthermore, all platoon members had taken an introductory course in psychology and had been exposed to Asch conformity in their respective course. Most of the participants were aware that the experiment was some version of Asch conformity.

Successful execution of this type of experiment depends upon subjects being unaware that they are in a conformity experiment. It is important to collect social network data at least a month prior to the conformity experiment to ensure that subjects and confederates do not link the two activities together. Furthermore, the questions must be embedded in a normal activity that actors would be expected to do. For these reasons, the MP platoon provided a better source of data for the experiment.

3. Results

The experiments conducted on the MP platoon were collected without incidence. The confederates of the experiment were very disciplined and professional and never let on that they were intentionally providing wrong answers. Results are reported in Table 1. The "N" in front of the subject identification code represents a noncommissioned officer, who would occupy a formal leadership position within the platoon. The "E" in front of the subject identification code represents an enlisted soldier, who would have no formal leadership responsibilities. The numbers of conforming responses to incorrect questions are reported in the second column. The remaining columns record the scaled network centrality values for the subjects.

There was a high correlation between network centrality and conformity in both groups. Table 2 displays the correlation between network centrality in the friendship affinity / respect networks and the number of questions where subjects conformed to the group to provide an incorrect response.

There is a higher correlation between betweenness centrality in the friendship network and conformity. This suggests that people who hold positions of informal power in the friendship network may feel free to speak their opinion without sanction from the social group. People who are peripheral to the group with betweenness centrality scores of 0, are more likely to conform to gain social acceptance or power within the group.

There is a higher correlation between conformity and centrality in the friendship network than centrality in the respect network. This may indicate that for these social groups, friendship is more important than respect within these social circles. It is also possible that performance in this particular task would not be perceived as a source of prestige and respect. For this reason, participants might be more affected by their friendship network than the respect network.

Conformity between the central and peripheral groups was also analyzed using a two-sample T-Test. For the MP platoon there was a statistically significant difference in conformity rate between the group of central actors and the group of peripheral actors ($T = -3.23$, $n = 8$, $p = 0.0420$).

Results from the group of cadets were not as compelling. Informal interviews with subjects following experiments revealed that they all were aware that they were the subjects of a social psychology experiment. Additionally, most cadets, regardless of whether they were a subject or confederate of the experiment, were not familiar with correct responses to many of the questions. This may have increased conformity due to a lack of knowledge rather than social compliance. Finally, after five experiments the other intended subjects became aware of the study and the remaining planned experiments were unable to be completed. For the five subjects where successful data collection was completed, their conformity and scaled centrality scores are reported in Table 3.

There was a similar statistically significant difference in conformity for the cadet platoon ($T = -3.54$, $n = 5$, $p = 0.0383$). Thus, even with the observed problems in data collection, results show that central actors were less likely to conform. There were a much higher number of conforming responses in the central group for the cadet platoon (18.5 conforming responses on average) compared to the central group for the MP platoon (2 conforming responses on average). There was no statistical difference between the number of conforming responses between the peripheral groups of the cadet and MP platoons, 24.6 and 22.5 respectively.

Table 4 reports the correlations between the number of conforming responses and the scaled network centrality measures for the cadet platoon. The correlations between network centrality and the number of conforming responses was much stronger in the cadet group than it was in the MP group. It is important to note, however, that in the cadet group, there is a high level of correlation among the subjects' centrality measures at 0.85, compared to 0.41 in the MP group. However, the fact that there remains high correlation between network position and conformity reinforces the hypothesis that network centrality is an important variable in social conformity.

With the cadet group, in-degree centrality is more highly correlated with conformity than closeness or betweenness centrality. In the MP platoon the reverse is true. Furthermore, in the MP platoon, position in the friendship network appeared more significant than position in the respect network, whereas, in the cadet platoon, there was no significant difference between position in the friendship and respect networks. There are many possible reasons for this. There was a smaller sample size for the cadet group. The cadets had much more diverse social circles and greater opportunities for social connections. Finally, the cadets did not depend upon one another for their work performance. In a college setting, the performance of an individual does not directly affect the others in the group. If a cadet performs poorly in their academics, it does not affect the academics of his peers. Thus, a cadet's source of prestige in the respect network is essentially his popularity within the friendship network. For the MP platoon, however, job performance is largely separated from social performance and the friendship and respect networks have greater difference.

4. Conclusion

This experiment shows empirical evidence of the impact of social network position on social conformity. Actors who are central to the group and have social acceptance are free to act in a manner inconsistent with the group and remain secure in their position. Peripheral actors who may be attempting to gain social acceptance have greater pressure to conform to the social group. Even in the cadet platoon, where subjects suspected they were in an experiment, there was a greater likelihood for peripheral actors to conform. This finding indicates that opinion leaders may have more freedom to deviate from group beliefs than they are constrained by their position in the organization.

There are several limitations to this study, however. None of the questions were necessarily related to cultural norms. Thus, a central actor's willingness to speak out against the group in this experiment may not remain consistent if he were violating a cultural norm. All of the questions were informational and did not have any ethical component. Therefore, this experiment does not address values or beliefs. It was not clear whether success in answering questions was even perceived as having value within the organizational culture of the group.

It is not clear how important the defined social group is to the subject's self-identity. For soldiers in the MP platoon, there are few enlisted soldiers on the installation that might provide opportunities to make friendships. Few of the soldiers have any extended family members in the area. This may create a greater need for social acceptance within the platoon. The cadets, in contrast, have relationships through their academic courses, sporting teams, extracurricular activities, and previous organizations. This provided the cadets much greater opportunity to find social relationships external to the platoon.

There is limited data. This experiment was conducted on two groups of military respondents. While there are significant findings of network position effect on conformity in both

Table 1. MP Group Conformity Responses and Network Centrality Measures.

Subject	Number of Conforming Responses	Between Centrality Friendship	Between Centrality Respect	Closeness Centrality Friendship	Closeness Centrality Respect	In-Degree Centrality Friendship	In-Degree Centrality Respect
N1	2	0.1213	0.0000	0.0884	0.0500	0.2632	0.5263
N2	0	0.1023	0.0139	0.0896	0.0625	0.2105	0.4737
E3	3	0.1754	0.0000	0.2021	0.0880	0.2105	0.0000
E4	3	0.1360	0.0288	0.2111	0.0969	0.0526	0.1053
E5	25	0.0000	0.0000	0.0500	0.0819	0.1579	0.0526
N6	10	0.0000	0.0019	0.0880	0.0950	0.0526	0.0526
N7	26	0.0000	0.0000	0.0848	0.0664	0.1053	0.0000
E8	30	0.0000	0.0000	0.0500	0.0657	0.0526	0.0000

Table 2. MP Group Correlations Between Network Centrality and Conformity.

	Conformity
Centrality Betweenness Friendship	-0.84
Centrality Closeness Friendship	-0.62
Centrality In Degree Respect	-0.61
Centrality In Degree Friendship	-0.48
Centrality Betweenness Respect	-0.48
Centrality Closeness Respect	-0.10

Table 3. Cadet Group Conformity Responses and Network Centrality Measures.

Subject	Number of Conforming Responses	Between Centrality Friendship	Between Centrality Respect	Closeness Centrality Friendship	Closeness Centrality Respect	In-Degree Centrality Friendship	In-Degree Centrality Respect
C1	17	0.0689	0.0039	0.3571	0.0333	0.2333	0.4000
C2	20	0.0151	0.0041	0.3614	0.0345	0.2000	0.2000
C3	23	0.0004	0.0000	0.2055	0.0344	0.1667	0.0333
C4	25	0.0142	0.0000	0.2055	0.0344	0.1667	0.0000
C5	26	0.0000	0.0000	0.2190	0.0356	0.1333	0.0000

Table 4. Cadet Group Correlations Between Network Centrality and Conformity.

	Conformity
Centrality Betweenness Friendship	-0.83
Centrality Closeness Friendship	-0.89
Centrality In Degree Respect	-0.97
Centrality In Degree Friendship	-0.97
Centrality Betweenness Respect	-0.90
Centrality Closeness Respect	-0.83

groups, more data is required for substantial findings. It is very difficult to obtain data of this nature, however. An investigator must obtain social network data on a group and then deliver a conformity test that is not obvious to the group members. This is very challenging as demonstrated with the suboptimal data collection for the cadet platoon. Fortunately, the protocol used in this experiment offers some important considerations for successful data collection as demonstrated with the MP platoon. This paper provides an important contribution in the design of network conformity experiments.

These experiments provide an important contribution in demonstrating a social network effect on conformity. The Asch conformity rate of 37% dropped to 5% when at least one other group member did not conform. While subjects reported good feelings toward the other non-conformist, they denied that person's impact on their own decision process. However, the significant difference in empirical findings suggests that other non-conformists play an important role in a person's decision to conform. This experiment provides structural context behind social conformity. Not only does network position offer an explanation for the impact of peers in social conformity, it provides a significant explanation of conformity in the first place. In the MP platoon, almost all of the central actors chose to answer according to their own views and did not conform. In contrast, almost all of the peripheral actors chose to conform. This trend continued in the cadet platoon, when the actors knew they were part of an experiment.

While this experiment was limited in size and scope, its potential findings are very important to understanding social conformity. With successful IRB approval, future experiments should repeat other Asch type experiments. What is the impact of another dissenting vote from a confederate of the experiment? Can culturally defined prestige variables be included in the experiment? What relationships matter most; friendship, advice, respect, or other relations? How many alternate social circles do actors have that can diversify their need for social acceptance within the group under study? All of these questions offer potentially better explanations for social conformity. This experiment demonstrates the importance of social network position in social conformity research. It is not the random dissenter or conformist that matters. Structure is a critical variable for conformity.

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