RUNNING HEAD: MORAL CONFORMITY

Conformity on Moral, Social Conventional, and Decency Issues in the United Kingdom and Kuwait

Hessah Alshaalan[1,2] and Michaela Gummerum[1 *]

[1]Department of Psychology, University of Warwick, UK

[2] School of Psychology, University of Plymouth, UK

In press, *International Journal of Psychology*

*Please send correspondence to

Michaela Gummerum, Department of Psychology, University of Warwick, Gibbet Hill

Coventry, CV4 7AL, United Kingdom

Telephone: (+44) (0)2476 939680

Michaela.gummerum@warwick.ac.uk

Author Contributions:

HA: data collection and analysis; interpretation of data; drafting of article

MG: conception and design of study; interpretation of data; critical revision of manuscript

Abstract

Theories in moral psychology have debated whether people's moral judgments are influenced by social processes, such as others' opinions, arguments, and actions. This research investigated conformity with moral, social-conventional, and decency issues in adults from the United Kingdom (Study 1, $N = 50$) and Kuwait (Study 2, $N = 164$). Participants first had to make individual judgments regarding moral, social-conventional, and decency transgressions. Using a conformity paradigm with low social presence, five to ten days afterwards participants were presented with the judgments of a more permissive majority. British participants conformed to the majority for decency, and to a lesser extent moral, transgressions. Kuwaiti participants conformed across domains. Furthermore, females in Kuwait conformed more than males. These findings are discussed with reference to the influence of cultural, moral and gender norms on conformity. Furthermore, we consider the contributions of these findings in light of theories of moral judgment and conformity.

Keywords: Moral judgment; conformity; moral domains; Middle East

Conformity on Moral, Social Conventional, and Decency Issues in the United Kingdom and Kuwait

How do people form moral opinions and make moral judgments? Moral judgments have been defined "as evaluations (good vs. bad) of the actions or character of a person" (Haidt, 2001, p. 817). Rationalist approaches in moral psychology have suggested that people's moral opinions and judgments are based on processes of reasoning or calculations of the beneficial and harmful consequences of actions (e.g., Cushman, 2013; Kohlberg, 1984; Turiel, 1983), which are often assumed to be private and individual. Other approaches, for example Haidt's (2001) social-intuitionist model of moral judgment, propose that social processes strongly affect individual moral judgments through two pathways: Based on the reasoned-persuasion link, one person's reasoning or arguments about a moral issue affects another's moral judgment. According to the social-persuasion link, merely knowing others' moral evaluations changes an individual's moral judgment in line with these opinions (Haidt, 2001). The current research further investigated this social-persuasion link. We drew on Asch's (1956) conformity paradigm and investigated whether individuals from the United Kingdom (UK) and Kuwait conform to others' moral opinions.

Conformity

Asch's (1956) classic research has served as a benchmark for research on conformity, the act of changing one's behavior to correspond to those of others (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). The original experiments explored to which degree social pressure from a consistent, but incorrect, majority influences the conformity of a minority in a line judgment task. These studies showed that 75% of minority members conformed at least once, while 37% of participants conformed in all critical trials where the majority members consistently gave the wrong answers. Decades of research (e.g., Bond & Smith, 1996; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Crutchfield, 1955; Eagly & Carli, 1981) confirmed Asch's original findings, but found that

conformity levels varied depending on the characteristics of the participants or methodology used. Eagly and Carli's (1981) meta-analysis found that females conformed more than males, but this gender effect was moderated by other variables, such as the content of the conformity stimuli, the gender composition of the group, or gender role expectations. Bond and Smith (1996) showed that people from collectivistic cultures conformed more than those from individualistic cultures. Unlike in Asch's studies, in the Crutchfield (1955) paradigm, participants were not physically in the same room, but members were placed in individual booths with electronic display boards showing others' decisions and partition walls preventing participants from seeing each other. In general, conformity was higher in face-to-face interactions than in situations where people do not interact in person, such as in the Crutchfield paradigm or in computerized versions of the Asch paradigm (Smilowitz et al., 1988).

Moral Conformity

Investigating whether people conform to the moral opinions of others is interesting as moral questions might not always have an obvious correct answer. Furthermore, assessing moral conformity is a test of the social-persuasion link in Haidt's (2001) social-intuitionist model. But what makes a particular issue a "moral" issue? Domain theory (Turiel, 1983) differentiates between judgments people make regarding moral issues and evaluations of social-conventional issues. The domain of morality encompasses concerns related to not harming others, fairness, rights, and justice. Social conventions are consensually decided uniformities, anticipations, or rules that arrange people's interactions inside a specific social system (e.g., how to greet a person; what clothes to wear at a funeral). Social conventions are more arbitrary than moral rules and can be changed by social agreement (Turiel, 1983).

Cross-cultural research (Haidt et al., 1993; Shweder et al., 1987) indicated that people's concerns with what is right and wrong also included issues pertaining to spiritual

purity and degradation. For example, Haidt et al. (1993) presented adults and children in the US and Brazil with "decency violations", affective stories with disrespectful or disgusting actions that "feel" disgusting and wrong but are harmless. While participants strongly reject these decency violations, they could not produce reasons as to why these violations were wrong (nobody gets harmed), a phenomenon that Haidt (2001) calls moral dumbfounding. Thus, such decency violations put people's moral emotions (the action must be wrong because it is disgusting) and their moral reasoning (the actions is not harmful) in conflict.

A few studies have investigated whether people conform on moral, social-conventional, and decency issues. Kundu and Cummins (2013) used the Asch paradigm and asked participants' to verbally rate the permissibility of 12 moral dilemmas that differed in terms of how "permissible" the actions were. Participants were either tested individually (control condition) or in a group containing three confederates (experimental condition). In the experimental condition, confederates consistently gave atypical judgments compared to those observed in previous research (e.g., they judged a previously permissible item as highly impermissible and v.v.). Two additional items had received highly conflicting scores in past research (i.e., were either rated as permissible or impermissible by confederates). Participants' moral judgments were strongly impacted by social consensus: "Permissible" items were rated as more impermissible under social pressure and "impermissible" items as more permissible. For conflicting items participants also conformed with the groups' consensus.

Hornsey et al. (2003) investigated whether the strength of people's attitudes towards moral issues moderated whether they privately or publicly conformed with the majority opinion on these issues. Participants who were in favor of pro-gay legal rights (Study 1) or for the government to provide an apology to Aborigines (Study 2) but who varied in the strength of their moral attitudes to these issues were presented with statistical information

(i.e., the group norm) of others being either strongly in favor or strongly against participants' opinions on these issues. Participants were then asked how willing they would be to perform a number of activities supporting their opinion either privately (i.e., with others not knowing about these actions) or publicly (i.e., others know about these actions). Results across two studies showed that, in private, participants with weak moral attitudes were more likely to act in line with the group norm, but the norm did not affect the private conformity of people with a strong moral attitude. Concerning public actions, marginal moderation effects emerged: Participants with weak moral attitudes were not affected by the group norm, but those with strong moral attitudes were marginally more likely to act counter to the group norm. Thus, strength of moral attitude emerged as a moderator for public and private moral conformity.

Lisciandra et al. (2013) examined participants' conformity in responses to moral, social-conventional, and decency transgressions. Participants first rated moral, social-conventional, and decency transgressions in an online questionnaire individually about two weeks before the group experiment. In the group conditions, participants were confronted with three confederates who unanimously gave answers to the scenarios that were two scale points more extreme than the answer usually given to that scenario. In high social presence groups, participants were seated with the confederates and could see and hear each other. In low social presence groups, participants were seated in front of a computer in the same room, but could not see the others. In the control condition, participants rated the same items again individually. Results showed that in the high social presence group, participants conformed for all transgression types, but significantly more on social-conventional and decency than moral scenarios. Participants in the low social presence groups showed higher conformity for moral and social transgressions but lower conformity for decency violations compared to the control group. Conformity to moral, social-conventional, and decency transgressions did not

differ within the low social presence condition. Thus, the type of violation and the social distance between group members mattered for conformity.

Kelly et al. (2017) were interested in whether adults conformed with moral and decency violations online. In Study 1, participants saw statistical information about how often a particular response was chosen by others (i.e., the descriptive norm). Participants conformed with the presented statistical information both for moral and decency items. They judged actions as more acceptable when the descriptive social norm indicated that the majority of past raters also regarded the action as acceptable and vice versa. Study 2 additionally presented statements with either emotional or rational justifications for the descriptive norms. Participants were more likely to conform with others' ratings of the scenario when they presented a rational rather than an emotional justification.

To our knowledge, only one study has investigated cultural differences in conformity regarding morally issues. Enesco et al. (2016) tested pre-schoolers from China and Spain using a moral scenario in a peer-exclusion context where it was clear that the performed action was immoral and an ambiguous scenario where the action performed could be interpreted as immoral or not (i.e., the protagonist in the story could have been pushed intentionally or fallen accidentally). In a non-dissenter condition, participants watched a video of three teachers expressing a unanimous opinion on the scenarios. Participants accepted the opinion of the majority for the ambiguous scenario more than for the moral scenario. Additionally, children from China followed a unanimous majority more than those from Spain.

In sum, several studies have shown that adults (and children) conform to majorities on moral items. However, conformity depends on the domain (e.g., moral, social-conventional, decency) and other variables, such as social distance between group members or culture.

The Present Research

The main goal of the current research was to investigate adults' conformity with moral, social-conventional, and decency issues in Kuwait (Study 2). Since the methodology of the current research differed from earlier studies on moral conformity, we also included a sample of UK adults (Study 1) for comparison reasons. In both studies, participants interacted with other group members over the computer, similar to the online setting of Kelly et al. (2017). This situation is even lower in social presence than the one in Lisciandra et al. (2013) where group members sat in the same room. Kelly et al. (2017) showed that participants conformed to moral and decency issues even when only presented with the descriptive social norm. Therefore, we expected participants to conform to the majority for moral and decency issues.

Middle-Eastern societies, and Kuwait specifically, have been classified as collectivistic and hierarchical cultures (see www.hofstede.org). Given meta-analytic findings on the higher levels of conformity in collectivistic than individualistic societies (Bond & Smith, 1996) and higher conformity on moral issues among Chinese than Spanish children (Enesco et al., 2016), we expected adults from Kuwait to show high levels of conformity. However, no study has investigated conformity on moral, social, conventional, and decency issues in the Middle East. Cross-cultural research (e.g., Graham et al., 2011; Shweder et al., 1987) indicated that while adults in western societies differentiate between these domains in their judgments and behaviors, adults in non-western societies perceive moral, social-conventional, and decency violations as similarly blameworthy. Graham et al. (2011) propose therefore that adults in non-western societies conceptualize the moral domain more widely than western participants, encompassing not just concerns for harm and rights, but also concerns related to group functioning, authority, and purity. Alqahtani et al. (2020) showed that Saudi participants exhibited similar moral judgments and behaviors across five different moral, social-conventional, and decency domains, whereas UK participants differentiated

more sharply between judgments related to avoiding harm and promoting fairness on the one and judgments related to group loyalty, respecting authority, and purity on the other hand. Concerns relating to group loyalty, authority, and purity are often seen as social-conventional rather than moral concerns in western societies (Graham et al., 2011). Given that adults were more likely to conform to moral and decency than social-conventional concerns in the low social presence condition in Lisciandra et al.'s (2013) study, we expected both UK and Kuwaiti participants to be more likely to conform on moral and decency than social-conventional issues. However, since the moral domain is conceptualized more broadly in Middle Eastern societies, we might also see high levels of conformity in all three domains in Kuwaiti participants.

While previous meta-analyses (Eagly, 1987) indicated that females conform more than males, this gender effect was moderated by, among other things, domain, historical time, and cultural gender roles. Furthermore, conformity experiments conducted in online settings showed mixed effects of gender (Wijenayake et al., 2020). Gender differences might be more pronounced among Kuwaiti than UK participants given more traditional gender roles in Middle Eastern societies. Thus, we predicted that females would conform more than males, but that this gender effect would be more pronounced in Kuwait than the UK. Given that studies have reported mixed results concerning age differences in conformity across adulthood (Klein, 1972; Pasupathi, 1999), age effects were investigated exploratively.

Study 1: Moral Conformity in the United Kingdom

Study 1 investigated whether UK adults conformed with a majority's opinion regarding moral, social-conventional, and decency issues in a low social-presence situation.

Method

Participants

UK participants were recruited through the participant pool of Plymouth University, which includes students and adults from the general population. Sixty-four participants were recruited. Out of these, 14 participants only took part in Part 1 of the study and were consequently deleted from the sample. The final sample contained 50 participants (M_{Age} = 31.29 years, *SD* = 14.76, 34 females, 16 males). While no information about ethnicity or social class was collected, over 90% of participants in the participant pool identify as middle-class and White-British. Participants received either course credit or money (£2/15 minutes) for taking part.

Measures

Moral, Decency, and Social-conventional Scenarios. Fifteen scenarios were taken from Lahat et al. (2012) and Lisciandra et al. (2013). Five scenarios represented moral, social-conventional, and decency violations, respectively (see Supplementary Materials, Table S1). In both the individual online questionnaire (Part 1) and the group situation (Part 2), participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disapprove) to 7 (strongly approve).

Filler Items were taken from the domain-specific risk-taking scale (DOSPERT, Weber et al., 2002; see Supplementary Materials, Table S1). Participants responded, both in the individual and group situations, using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 7 (extremely likely). Filler items were added to follow the design used in previous research on moral conformity (Lisciandra et al., 2013) and to reduce demand characteristics.

Procedure

The study received ethical approval from the (blinded for review) Human Ethics Committee. Participants were briefed about the study and had to sign a consent form.

Part 1 (online survey) was sent to participants 10 to 5 days before the lab-based study (Part 2). After being briefed and consenting to taking part, participants were asked to state their gender and date of birth and created a personal ID code. Then they rated the 38 scenarios (15 morality, decency, or social conventional items; 23 filler items) individually and privately. The 38 scenarios were presented in random order. Part 1 took no longer than 15 minutes.

Ten to five days afterwards, participants were invited to the group-based Part 2, which took place at the Psychology laboratories at Plymouth University. Up to eight participants were tested at the same time. Participants sat in one of eight cubicles, which were separated by floor-to-ceiling walls and doors leading to an internal corridor. After being briefed and having signed the consent form, participants had to fill in demographic questions and entered their personal ID code. Participants were told that they would make decisions with three other participants online. These other group members could be in the same session with them or in other sessions. Group members were anonymous to each other; at the beginning of each session, each group member chose an avatar to represent them, and decisions during the group task were only associated with the chosen avatar.

Participants were then presented with the 38 scenarios in pseudo-random order (Supplementary Materials, Table S1). For 29 of the 38 scenarios, the critical trials, participants were confronted with the ratings of one, two, or three of the supposed other participants, denoted as “Social pressure” in Table S1. Social pressure equalling 1 means that participants saw the response of one of the other participants, social pressure of 2 means that participants saw responses of two group members, etc. In fact, the responses were pre-determined in the design of the study and were not based on real participants’ ratings. For 9 scenarios, the non-critical trials, participants did not receive information about others’ ratings (social pressure = 0; see Figure S1a, Supplementary Materials). Table 1 shows the twelve

critical scenarios used in the moral, social-conventional, and decency domains. One scenario per domain (i.e., three altogether) was non-critical (social pressure = 0) and are not displayed in Table 1. Since we were only interested in critical items, only 12, not 15 items, were analysed.

Following Lisciandra et al. (2013), the other group members' ratings of the critical scenarios were two scale points more permissive (for the moral, social conventional, and decency scenarios) than the mean individual ratings in a pilot study. The other group members' ratings are denoted as "confederates' opinions" in Table S1. For example, in Scenario 30 (Figure S1b, Supplementary Materials) participants were presented with the responses of two group members, one of them rated this action as "neutral", the other as "slightly approve". Thus, for Scenario 30, social pressure was 2, confederates' opinions was 4.5.

After participants made their decisions, they were thanked, debriefed and paid or received course credit. Part 2 took no longer than 30 minutes.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for participants' individual and group responses to the critical moral, social conventional and decency scenarios.

Following Lisciandra et al. (2013), conformity (C) was calculated as $C = |O - M1| - |O - M2|$, with M1 denoting participants' responses in the individual condition, M2 denoting participants' responses in the group condition, and O denoting confederates' opinions. A positive value of C indicates that participants' ratings shifted closer to the other group members' in the group condition, a negative value denotes that the distance between participants' and other group members' ratings increased, and a value of 0 indicates that there was no shift. The distribution of Conformity (C) was approximately normal (skewness = .25, SE = .10; kurtosis = 1.24, SE = .20).

Table 1

Means (and Standard Deviations) of Participants' Individual Responses (Part 1) and Responses in Group Setting (Part 2) on Critical Trials by Culture (UK, Kuwait) and Domain (Moral, Social-conventional, Decency)

		Study 1: UK		Study 2: Kuwait	
		Individual responses (Part 1)	Responses in group setting (Part 2)	Individual responses (Part 1)	Responses in group setting (Part 2)
		M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*
	Moral Critical Trials				
9	Jennifer hitting a teacher	1.14 (.50)	1.36 (.60)	1.39 (.86)	1.76 (1.11)
18	Sara making cruel remarks	1.49 (.68)	1.72 (.73)	1.74 (1.16)	1.84 (.99)
23	Charlie and Ben deciding to cheat	2.06 (1.13)	2.48 (1.28)	2.11 (1.24)	3.05 (1.39)
38	Ted kicking a dog in the head, hard.	1.08 (.34)	1.20 (.61)	1.53 (1.07)	1.55 (.90)
	Social-conventional Critical Trials				
14	Mary cutting the line	2.14 (.89)	2.24 (.94)	1.86 (1.14)	2.15 (1.31)
24	Lisa making a phone call in the cinema	1.55 (.74)	1.60 (.67)	2.29 (1.44)	2.46 (1.38)
28	Sharon addressing her teacher by his first name	3.43 (1.16)	3.66 (1.14)	3.07 (1.47)	3.37 (1.44)

34	Robert only buying a drink for himself	2.69 (1.33)	3.24 (1.38)	3.16 (1.52)	3.59 (1.49)
	Decency Critical Trials				
8	Susan eating cereals with grubs and insects	2.37 (1.37)	3.04 (1.62)	1.65 (1.13)	1.82 (1.15)
19	A brother and sister kissing each other on the mouth	1.67 (.92)	1.98 (1.12)	1.16 (.67)	1.34 (.82)
27	Ed creating a performance art piece	2.61 (1.40)	3.00 (1.47)	1.26 (.82)	1.80 (1.29)
30	A family cooking and eating their dead dog	1.86 (1.24)	2.22 (1.40)	1.55 (1.14)	1.96 (1.26)

Table 2 shows the mean conformity levels in the moral, social conventional, and decency domains by gender. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with the dependent variable Conformity, the independent variables Domain (moral, social-conventional, decency) and Gender (female, male) and the co-variate Age (in years) revealed a significant main effect of Domain, $F(2, 569) = 5.38$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .02$. All other main and interaction effects were non-significant.[1] Post-hoc tests (with Bonferroni corrections) indicated significantly higher conformity in the decency than the social conventional domain ($p = .002$). There was no difference in conformity in the moral and social conventional domains ($p = .87$) and the decency and moral domains ($p = .051$).

One-sample t-tests showed that conformity in the moral, $t(195) = 4.35$, $p < .001$, $d = .31$, and decency domain, $t(195) = 6.61$, $p < .001$, $d = .47$, differed significantly and

[1]Gender, $F(1, 569) = 1.18$, $p = .28$, $\eta^2 = .002$; Age, $F(1, 569) = .006$, $p = .94$, $\eta^2 = .00$; Domain x Gender, $F(2, 569) = 1.10$, $p = .33$, $\eta^2 = .004$

positively from 0. Conformity in the social-conventional domain did not differ from 0, $t(195) = 1.93$, $p = .06$, $d = 14$.

Table 2

Study 1: Mean (and Standard Deviations of) Conformity by Domain and Gender

	Females		Males		Total	
Domain	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Moral	.18	.56	.24	.75	.20	.62
Social conventional	.17	.83	-.02	.77	.11	.82
Decency	.40	.81	.30	.73	.37	.79
Total	.25	.75	.17	.76	.23	.75

Overall, Study 1's findings are in line with those reported by Kelly et al. (2017). Even in a situation with low social presence, participants conformed to others' opinions. This conformity was particularly pronounced for moral and decency items, but less so for social conventional concerns. This highlights the fact that rather minimal social information can be enough to sway participants' opinions towards those of the majority.

Study 1 did not reveal any age or gender effects. Research on conformity across adulthood has generally shown mixed results with some studies showing that younger adults conform more than older ones and vice versa, depending on the decision domain (Klein, 1972; Pasupathi, 1999). We could not identify age effects, even though we recruited a sample with a wide age range. Similarly, no gender effects in conformity emerged. Numerous studies have found that females conform more than males, but that these gender differences were moderated by variables, such as historical period and cultural gender roles (Eagly, 1987). However, it should be acknowledged that the sample size of Study 1 was small and not well-

balanced regarding gender. Therefore, Study 1 might not have had enough power to detect gender effects. Since other studies on moral conformity in western societies did not collect gender information (Kelly et al., 2017), investigating the role of gender differences in moral conformity should be a priority for future research.

Study 2: Moral Conformity in Kuwait

Study 2 drew on a new sample and investigated whether the findings regarding conformity to moral, social-conventional, and decency concerns can be generalized to a non-western, Middle-Eastern culture.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited by approaching undergraduate students taking a one-semester course at Kuwait University. Two-hundred and forty participants were initially recruited. However, a number of participants were excluded from the final sample: 53 only took part in Part 1, 23 participants had more than five missing answers on the individual questionnaire. The final sample consisted of 164 adults (M_{Age} = 21.49 years, SD = 6.14, 90 females, 74 males). Students at the university were all Kuwaiti nationals and are recruited from middle-class background. Participants received course credit.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained by the (blinded for review) University Ethics Board. Participants in Kuwait followed the same produce as UK participants. They first participated in the individual Part 1, and five to 10 days later in the group Part 2. All testing was conducted in Arabic by a female experimenter, a native Arabic speaker.

Measures

The same measures as for the UK participants were used, translated into Arabic by a native Arabic speaker and checked for correctness and understanding by another independent native Arabic speaker.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for participants' individual and group decisions for the critical moral, social-conventional, and decency trials. As for Study 1, we created the variable Conformity (see Table 3).

An ANOVA with the dependent variable Conformity, the independent variables Domain and Gender, and the covariate Age revealed a significant main effect of Gender, $F(1, 1586) = 12.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .008$. The other main or interaction effects did not reach statistical significance.[2]

Table 3

Study 2: Mean (and Standard Deviations of) Conformity by Domain and Gender

	Females		Males		Total	
Domain	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Moral	.44	.99	.18	.93	.33	.97
Social conventional	.25	1.14	.18	1.15	.22	1.14
Decency	.47	1.07	.18	1.18	.34	1.13
Total	.39	1.07	.18	1.09	.30	1.08

Females showed consistently higher conformity than males across domains (Table 3). However, one-sample t-tests showed that conformity was larger than 0 in both females,

[2] Domain, $F(2, 1586) = 1.55$, $p = .21$, $\eta^2 = .002$; Age, $F(1, 1586) = 2.94$, $p = .09$, $\eta^2 = .002$; Domain x Gender, $F(2, 1586) = 1.64$, $p = .20$, $\eta^2 = .002$

$t(1075) = 11.39$, $p < .001$, $d = .35$ and males, $t(887) = 5.37$, $p < .001$, $d = .18$. Thus, both males' and females' ratings shifted closer to the other group members', but this shift was stronger in females than males. This gender effect is in line with previous meta-analyses (Bond & Smith; 1996; Eagly & Carli, 1981). It might be that cultural gender-role expectations, which are more traditional in Kuwaiti society (Kucinskas, 2010), underlie these gender differences. In Eagly's (1987) analysis, one major determinant affecting the size of gender differences in conformity was the historical period with research carried out before 1970 (more unequal gender relations in society) showing that females conform more and research carried out after 1970 (more equal gender relations) showing no gender differences. Future research should investigate whether variables, such a gender-role expectations, moderate the effect of gender on conformity in non-western societies.

Conformity did not significantly differ across domains. One-sample t-tests showed that conformity was significantly and positively different from 0 in the moral, $t(652) = 8.10$, $p < .001$, $d = .32$, social-conventional, $t(652) = 5.23$, $p < .001$, $d = .21$, and decency domain, $t(653) = 7.55$, $p < .001$, $d = .30$. Thus, participants shifted their ratings towards those of the other group members in all three domains.

General Discussion

The aim of this research was to investigate conformity in the moral, social-conventional and decency domains among adult participants from the UK and Kuwait. While the study of conformity has a long history, research on whether and how people conform to others' moral opinions is still comparatively rare. Furthermore, very little research exists on conformity in Middle-Eastern societies, and no study has investigated moral conformity in these societies. This research thus contributes to our understanding of the universality of and differences in morality and conformity across domains and cultures.

Drawing on a sample of UK adults, Study 1's results are similar to those reported previously (Kelly et al., 2017; Lisciandra et al., 2013): In the group condition, UK participants' opinions shifted closer to those of the other group members particularly for decency, but also moral items. However, UK participants were least likely to conform in the social-conventional domain. In Study 2, Kuwaiti adults showed equal levels of conformity across domains. There was no gender effect among UK participants. While female participants from Kuwait conformed significantly more than males across domains, the effect size of this gender effect was small, even among the Kuwaiti sample. No age effects on conformity were found in either study. We will discuss the implications of these findings in turn.

Domain differences

There has been some discussion among moral psychologists as to what constitutes the moral domain. While social domain theory (Turiel, 1983) suggests that adults in western societies differentiate between moral (i.e., avoiding physical and psychological harm, upholding the rights of others) and social-conventional concerns (i.e., assuring effective social functioning of groups and institutions), cross-cultural research (e.g., Haidt et al., 1993; Shweder et al., 1987) indicated that adults in non-western societies perceive moral, social-conventional, and decency violations (i.e., sexual, religious, or cultural taboos that "feel" disgusting but are harmless) as similarly blameworthy. Indeed, empirical research (e.g., Graham et al., 2011) showed that while western participants distinguished more sharply between the three domains, participants from the Middle East conceptualize the moral domain more widely, including not just concerns for harm and rights, but also those related to (in)group functioning, authority, and purity (Alqahtani et al., 2020). These cultural effects are also reflected in Studies 1 and 2. Type of norm violation mattered for UK participants, with

the highest levels of conformity found in the decency domain, while participants from Kuwait showed no domain differences in conformity.

Why would decency judgments be particularly susceptible to conforming with others' opinions? Decency violations are very often accompanied by strong negative emotions, such as disgust (Haidt et al., 1993), but, unlike moral violations, are rarely associated with (physical) harm. Research has shown that asking people to reflect on whether a decency violation is actually harmful (i.e., consequentialist reflection) reduced the condemnation of decency violation among UK participants, but not among participants from Colombia (Hannikainen & Rosas, 2019). Thus, at least among western participants, asking adults to focus on the fact that decency violations are not physically harmful made them more acceptable. Concerning conformity, Kelly et al. (2017) showed that presenting participants with rational arguments in addition to descriptive social norms made participants' judgments more acceptable of decency violations. Thus, it might be that simply presenting participants the opinion of a majority concerning a decency violation that is more acceptable than their own might make them aware that the violation might not actually be harmful and therefore more likely to conform. It should be noted, however, that in our current study we only presented participants with a majority whose decency judgments were more acceptable than the individual participants'. This was because we closely followed the procedure by Lisciandra et al. (2013) who devised a similar conformity violation. Furthermore, on average, participants did not agree with the decency violations in their individual responses, so there was very little scope in trying to make participants conform to a more condemnable opinion. This is a topic that could be investigated further in future research (see Kelly et al., 2017).

Whereas in Kelly et al.'s (2017) study participants conformed to others' responses (represented as statistical descriptive norms in an online context) for both moral and decency items, Lisciandra et al. (2013) found that in the high social presence condition conformity

was lowest for the moral items. Indeed, the authors suggest that transgressions of moral norms "are more insulated from conformity effects" (p. 761). These mixed findings might indicate that conformity in the moral domain is moderated by other variables, such as type of social distance. Another possible moderator might be the strength of a person's moral convictions (see Hornsey et al., 2003) with those with stronger moral convictions being less likely to conform to others. Investigating whether cultural values predicted moral attitudes across 56 societies, Vauclair and Fischer (2011) found very little cross-cultural variations in attitudes towards dishonest and illegal behaviors, which were generally condemned. Similarly, in the current research, violations in the moral domain were generally disapproved of by participants from the UK and Kuwait (see Table 1). Yet, differences in cultural-value orientations (particularly the dimension of autonomy vs. embeddedness) predicted attitudes towards personal-sexual behaviors (which are comparable to some of decency scenarios used in the current studies; Vauclair & Fischer, 2011). Whether and how moral convictions, social distance, and cultural attitudes towards morality and decency affect moral conformity in different cultures should be investigated in future research.

Limitations and Future Research

The current studies followed previous research on moral conformity in western societies and extended these questions to a Kuwaiti context, a society where little research on conformity or moral decision making has been conducted. While our findings contribute both to research on conformity and moral functioning across cultures, they are not without limitations. First, our studies' set-up presented a low social pressure context with participants not seeing and hearing each other but interacting over computers. While this context mirrors many internet-based social interactions (e.g., on social media), this low social pressure context might actually underestimate the effect of conformity to moral, social-conventional, and decency items. Second, participants were only presented with the ratings made by the

other group members, not any reasons for these choices. Future research should implement some of the methodologies employed by Kelly et al. (2017) and study whether asking group members to state the rationales for their choices affects conformity in the different moral domains differently. Third, as discussed above, the current research only investigated whether participants' judgments in the group context would become more acceptable of moral, social conventional, or decency violations. Future research should examine whether participants would also rate violations as more impermissible to conform with others' opinions (Kundu & Cummins, 2013). Fourth, future research might investigate the role of emotions in moral conformity. In Haidt's (2001) social-intuitionist model to moral judgment the reasoned-persuasion and the social-persuasion links change others' moral judgments by creating new emotionally-valenced moral intuitions. This mediating role of moral emotions could be assessed by, for example, asking participants to judge their emotions associated with another's opinion. Fifth, following Lisciandra et al. (2013), we used filler items to make the aim of the research less transparent to participants. These were taken from the DOSPERT (Weber et al., 2002), an established scale measuring risk-taking. While we believe that it is good practice to use filler items to reduce the social desirability demands of conformity research, future studies might want to reduce the number of filler items. Finally, it should be acknowledged that the sample size for Study 1 was rather small, and the sample was not well-balanced for gender. This might have underestimated any significant gender effects in the UK sample.

As discussed above, the effects of gender and age have rarely featured in research on moral conformity, and the effects of gender role expectations and cultural values regarding gender should be investigated in future research. Furthermore, experiments conducted in online contexts (as in the present studies) have revealed mixed results regarding the effect of gender on conformity (Wijenayake et al., 2020). Given that studies on moral decision-making

haven often found age and gender effects (Walker, 2006), the effects of these variables should be studied further in future research on moral (and online) conformity.

Despite these limitations, the current research significantly contributes to our knowledge about the social influences on moral decision making. In line with Haidt's (2001) social-intuitionist model, we find that simply being exposed to others' opinions on morally-related issues makes adults more likely to conform with these opinions across moral domains, cultures, and genders. Future research should continue to explore potentially moderating effects on moral conformity across contexts and cultures.

Ethical Compliance Statement

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Plymouth, Faculty of Health and Human Sciences Human Ethics Board (Reference Number: 18/19-1048). All procedures performed in the studies were in accordance with the ethical standards of the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and the Research Ethics standards of the British Psychological Society. Informed consent was obtained from all individual adult participants included in the study. The authors have no funding to disclose and declare they have no conflict of interest.

References

Alqahtani, A., Bacon, A., & Gummerum, M. (2020). *Suppressing selfishness? The influence of moral values and moral identity on charitable giving and honesty in Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom.* Manuscript submitted for publication.

Asch, S. E. (1956). Studies of independence and conformity: I. A minority of one against a unanimous majority. *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied, 70,* 1-70. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0093718

Bond, R., & Smith, P. B. (1996). Culture and conformity: A meta-analysis of studies using Asch's (1952b, 1956) line judgment task. *Psychological Bulletin, 119,* 111-137. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.119.1.111

Cialdini, R. B., & Goldstein, N. J. (2004). Social influence: Compliance and conformity. *Annual Review of Psychology, 55,* 591-621.https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.142015

Crutchfield, R. S. (1955). Conformity and character. *American Psychologist, 10,* 191-198. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0040237

Cushman, F. (2013). Action, outcome, and value: A dual-system framework for morality. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 17,* 273-292. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868313495594

Eagly, A. H. (2013). *Sex differences in social behavior: A social-role interpretation.* New York: Psychology Press.

Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (1981). Sex of researchers and sex-typed communications as determinants of sex differences in influenceability: A meta-analysis of social influence studies. *Psychological Bulletin, 90,* 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.90.1.1

Enesco, I., Sebastián-Enesco, C., Guerrero, S., Quan, S., & Garijo, S. (2016). What makes children defy majorities? The role of dissenters in Chinese and Spanish preschoolers' social judgments. *Frontiers in Psychology, 7,* 1695. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01695

Graham, J., Nosek, B. A., Haidt, J., Iyer, R., Koleva, S., & Ditto, P. H. (2011). Mapping the moral domain. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *101*, 366-385. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021847

Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological Review*, *108*, 814-834. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.108.4.814

Haidt, J., Koller, S. H., & Dias, M. G. (1993). Affect, culture, and morality, or is it wrong to eat your dog? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *65*, 613-628. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.65.4.613

Hannikainen, I. R., & Rosas, A. (2019). Rationalization and reflection differentially modulate prior attitudes toward the purity domain. *Cognitive Science*, *43*, e12747. https://doi.org/10.1111/cogs.12747

Hornsey, M. J., Majkut, L., Terry, D. J., & McKimmie, B. M. (2003). On being loud and proud: Non-conformity and counter-conformity to group norms. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *42*, 319-335. https://doi.org/10.1348/014466603322438189’

Kelly, M., Ngo, L., Chituc, V., Huettel, S., & Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2017). Moral conformity in online interactions: Rational justifications increase influence of peer opinions on moral judgments. *Social Influence*, *12*, 57-68. https://doi.org/10.1080/15534510.2017.1323007

Klein, R. L. (1972). Age, sex, and task difficulty as predictors of social conformity. *Journal of Gerontology*, *27*, 229-236. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronj/27.2.229

Kohlberg, L. (1984). Essays on moral development: The psychology of moral development (Vol. 2). *New York: Harper & Row*.

Kucinskas, J. (2010). A research note on Islam and gender egalitarianism: An examination of Egyptian and Saudi Arabian youth attitudes. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *49*, 761-770. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2010.01545.x

Kundu, P., & Cummins, D. D. (2013). Morality and conformity: The Asch paradigm applied to moral decisions. *Social Influence, 8*, 268-279. https://doi.org/10.1080/15534510.2012.727767

Lahat, A., Helwig, C.C., & Zelazo, P. D. (2012). Age-related changes in cognitive processing of moral and social conventional violations. *Cognitive Development, 27*, 181-194. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogdev.2012.02.002

Lisciandra, C., Postma-Nilsenová, M., & Colombo, M. (2013). Conformorality. A study on group conditioning of normative judgment. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, *4*(4), 751–764. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-013-0161-4

Pasupathi, M. (1999). Age differences in response to conformity pressure for emotional and nonemotional material. *Psychology and Aging, 14*(1), 170–174. https://doi.org/10.1037/0882-7974.14.1.170

Shweder, R. A., Mahapatra, M., & Miller, J. G. (1987). Culture and moral development. In J. Kagan, & S. Lamb (Eds.), *The emergence of morality in young children* (pp. 1-83). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Smilowitz, M., Compton, D. C., & Flint, L. (1988). The effects of computer mediated communication on an individual's judgment: A study based on the methods of Asch's social influence experiment. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *4*, 311-321. https://doi.org/10.1016/0747-5632(88)90003-9

Turiel, E. (1983). *The development of social knowledge: Morality and convention*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Vauclair, C. M., & Fischer, R. (2011). Do cultural values predict individuals' moral attitudes? A cross-cultural multilevel approach. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 41*, 645-657. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.794

Walker, L.J. (2006). Gender and morality. In M. Killen, & J.G. Smetana (Eds.), *Handbook of moral development* (pp. 93-115). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Weber, E. U., Blais, A. R., & Betz, N. E. (2002). A domain-specific risk-attitude scale: Measuring risk perceptions and risk behaviors. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making, 15,* 263-290. https://doi.org/ 10.1002/bdm.414

Wijenayake, S., van Berkel, N., Kostakos, V., & Goncalves, J. (2020). Impact of contextual and personal determinants on online social conformity. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *108*, 106302. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106302