

The Obsolescence of Ritualistic Synchrony in the Modern World: Why Innovation and Creativity Outweigh Social Conformity

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All of a sudden, everyone stood up, faced a colorful banner, and chanted a few lines in unison with the sides of their hands placed deftly on their forehead. Some even had tears in their eyes. Then the music started, grand, triumphant, majestic, the instruments rose into a crescendo and bright lights lit up all over the field. "Defense! Defense" the crowd begins to scream in unity as the men line up face to face. You may think this is a scene from an ancient tribal war, but it's actually a Warriors game. The synchronous dancing, singing, chanting, drumming or marching that are often seen at sports games, political rallies, churches, schools, among others, is called ritualistic synchrony. Ritualistic synchrony is a series of acts regularly repeated in a set manner as a group, such as Tiwi people's coordinated dance and hand movements in initiation rituals or the Yamama group singing in harmony until food is shared (Gelfand et al, 2020).

Ritualistic synchrony has been primarily examined through "rose-coloured lenses" that discuss its function in society, from increasing compassion to cooperation in group activities and exercises (Valdesolo and DeSteno, 2011; Wiltermuth and Heath, 2008; Gelfand et al, 2020). Such forms of social conformity are generally associated with aiding survival and natural selection of those who practice it (Legare et al, 2020). For example, the complex ritual of pig slaughter among the Tsembaga that involve mass dances that last all night with their allies seen among groups that practice periodic warfare are thought to be a way to "avoid harm and promot[e] group cohesion and cooperation," and presumably lessening the probability of being killed in warfare (Legare et al., 2020). However, Gelfand et al. argue that social conformity, a result of ritualistic synchrony, is sometimes detrimental because it inhibits individualistic growth, creativity, and other social psychological aspects (Gelfand et al., 2020). Specifically, ritualistic synchrony is "destructive when diversity and healthy disagreements are important for groups to make effective decisions" (Gelfand et al., 2020). Gelfand et al. discusses the adaptive trade-off between cooperation and cohesion versus creativity and dissent, but does not provide any recommendation on its relevance in today's modernized and globalized world, while omitting discussion on nuances between the examples of social conformity in different contexts. After all, if synchrony is beneficial, should we not endorse its use in more contexts, or if it's detrimental, should its use be restricted? This paper explores the question of whether or not conformity via ritualistic synchrony is still beneficial in today's society from perspectives including ethnographic, historical, social psychology, business management theory, concluding that ritualistic synchrony and the subsequent conformity is detrimental.

First, humankind has developed ways to mitigate the threats ritualistic synchrony was originally used to combat. For example, in the ancient days of warfare, ritualistic synchrony was needed to bond together a large army of mostly strangers who were scared but decided to join due the army to nationalistic feelings; the ancient armies would have to go through direct combat with armies where trust and cooperation with army members were crucial. However, nowadays, modern warfare has changed into a competition of new technologies, such as in guns, nuclear bombs, etc.(Hillsdale College, 2016). Today it is seen primarily in fans at sporting events, choirs, religion, dancing concerts, chants at political rallies, corporate business procedures, cheers at school spirit events etc.

Even so, those arguing for the benefits of ritualistic synchrony state that it is still adaptive today as it promotes trust and cooperation in the absence of life-or-death situations traditionally. A study in which participants synchronously moved to rhythmic tempo, chanted, and answered questions concluded that synchronous behavior paired with a shared goal created the most trust in groups. When groups synchronize with the same intentionality, it "provides immediate feedback of successful cooperation in performing the synchronous task together so increasing perceived cooperation...participants feel greater trust and confidence that their fellow participants will cooperate in the future" (Reddish et al., 2013). Trust, cooperation, and confidence in one another is beneficial to a certain extent. For example, larger degrees of trust and cooperation within societies increase the mechanisms of economies of scale (mutually beneficial cooperation), gains from trade (someone can receive material that he/she needs more whilst giving someone else material he/she needs more), risk pooling (compensation in case risk factors occur), self-binding (preference inconsistency), and information transmission (Heath, 2006). All of these mechanisms refer to the fact that livelihoods turn out better for a society when individuals mutually cooperate, for example through assurance of compensation in unfavorable circumstances. Cooperation and trust are inarguably beneficial in society; however, the above study does not specifically cite ritualistic synchrony as the source of social trust. For example, trust and cooperation can develop through respectfully talking with others, getting to know them, listening empathically, being honest, and honoring commitments, etc. (Wilkins, 2018). Most children in Western society trust their parents, not because they conduct group chants every day, but because they have built up rapport, love, and trust over time. Since trust and cooperation can be gained via other means, ritualistic

synchrony is not required in modern society and is likely not worth the trade-off in creativity and innovation.

Conforming to others limits one's creativity. A study conducted by The Royal Society, had groups of three or four participants walk around a school for 7-8 min, either at the same pace and step as an experimenter or at their own pace. When groups were required to, after the walk, write a collaborative story together, groups that "marched synchronously around campus wrote less creative stories than groups that marched at their own pace... [s]tories by synchronous groups showed more typical characters and less innovative storylines than stories by asynchronous groups" (Gelfand et al., 2020). Groups that synchronously walked together collectively were less creative and therefore less innovative (in terms of their storyline) and more conforming to the common things (in terms of the characters they used). The way of life for humanity is advanced through innovation; innovation is paved out by individuals that discover the things not known to the pack of conforming individuals to enjoy. In fact, innovation is the biggest factor in generating growth and propelling humanity forward with various benefits (Ahlstrom, 2010).

Conformity and a subsequent loss of creativity leads to a less diverse population in terms of ideas and innovation. An analogy of this is seen in the painting, *The Holdout* by Norman Rockwell. In it, ten men are seen circling a woman trying to convince her to agree with them in the jury room (Rockwell, 1959). While the viewer does not know what they are debating, one's experiences and opinions are often formed by one's background, and in this case the juxtaposition between the group of men versus a lone woman, is telling. It is possible that the woman noticed something in the case that the men did not that could be critical to doling out justice. Similarly, diversity in ideas is important because different and unique ideas are the actual innovation taking place in society. A notable invention in recent years has been technological devices such as the computer and mobile phones; technological devices such as these require workers from all types of diverse fields. For example, workers are needed to take care of different aspects such as hardware, software, finances, advertising, etc. Without any of these aspects, technological devices such as the phone and computer wouldn't be as widespread as they are today.

The social pressures of conforming not only stifle creativity but can lead to individuals in the group being unwilling to speak out when their views differ from the group's common opinion. This type of blinded conformity is destructive not only for the individual but for everyone in

the group as shown by the Abilene Paradox, a phenomenon seen in management that is explained using social psychology. In the Abilene Paradox, four family members all agreed to drive "106-mile trip across a godforsaken desert in a furnace-like temperature through a cloud-like dust storm to eat unpalatable food at a hole-in-the-wall cafeteria in Abilene, when none of [them] had really wanted to go" (Harvey, 1988). In this example where all four members agreed (against their own private will) to go on a miserable trip, they each thought that their other family members actually wanted to go on the trip. The desire to cooperate to the extreme is fueled by the trust and closeness that can be created through social conformity and synchrony. The Abilene Paradox is common in real life, especially in the business world. Many examples of the Abilene Paradox in the business world include "couples who want to marry when they want to remain single...businesses that went bankrupt supporting unworkable programs and projects despite the unspoken agreement among key decision makers that the projects and programs could not succeed" (Kim, 2001). A member of a couple, though he/she doesn't want to get married, wants to cooperate with his/her partner who may want to get married; however, the other member of the couple is thinking the exact same thing. In these examples, people or businesses make major and disastrous decisions because of their desire for cooperation with the group, despite each privately thinking the project or idea is doomed to fail.

A notable example of the business world suffering due to social conformity is the collapse of Enron in 2001. Enron spread an intensely stimulating work environment, including constant exaltation of workers themselves and the higher up officials, that led to the brainwashing of workers. Workers were motivated to work long and gruesome hours, and less prone to dissent, when the company culture involved "fundamental changes of knowledge and beliefs, values and standards, emotional attachments and needs, and of everyday conduct...[n]ew dress codes, behaviors, beliefs and modes of being are embraced...outside observers come to see as a fundamental personality transformation, or new mode of being, on the part of the person concerned" (Tourish et. Al., 2005). Enron's culture created a group of yes-men who were blind to their leaders' faults and unable, or scared, to call out fraud and corruption. The result, as described by Tourish and Vatcha was Enron's descent into cult-status and the creation of a totalistic environment "in which the penalties for dissent were so severe and well known, while the benefits of conformity appeared so munificent, that critical voice was almost wholly absent from the organization's internal discourse." (Tourish et. Al.,

2005). Blind conformity can brainwash people into not believing or being too fearful to state their own opinions.

Other forms of blind conformation related to ritualistic synchrony can be found in history such as from Nazi Germany. An indoctrinated youth in Nazi Germany once wrote that their “parents taught us to raise our arms and say ‘Heil Hitler’ before we said ‘Mama’..We grew up believing that Hitler was a super-god, and Germany an appointed nation” (Nagel, 1977). During Hitler’s reign, people in Germany used ritualistic synchrony, such as in chants and arm movements, to build blind trust and cooperation in whatever Hitler or the Nazi Party wanted to do. This example shows that though ritualistic synchrony does build trust and cooperation within groups, it is a “cheap” form that allows people to feel emotional connection to others. The feelings of trust and cooperation brought about through ritualistic synchrony is often so strong that it overrides that of reason.

This paper has shown the benefits and harmful effects of ritualistic synchrony; the paper has also shown how the harmful effects of ritualistic synchrony outweigh the benefits in today’s innovation fueled world. In areas where creativity and innovation is valued, ritualistic synchrony is detrimental and should be removed because it hinders creativity and progress. Ritualistic synchrony should also be removed from situations that require logic and decision-making, such as in politics. However, for lighthearted activities such as basketball games, synchronous actions are fun and lively and are not detrimental because emotion is needed more than reason from a fans perspective. The main limitation to this suggestion is where to draw the fine line between innocuous usage of ritualistic synchrony and conformity and damaging usage for instances that fall in a gray area. Furthermore, many synchronous actions, such as chants and hand motions, are a form of free speech protected under the first amendment. As for whether or not ritualistic synchrony should be censured can be explored in future research.

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