

# IMPACT OF GROUP CONFORMITY ON ACADEMIC COUNSELING: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BOYS AND GIRLS IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THARAKA-NITHI COUNTY, KENYA

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of group conformity on academic counseling by comparing boys and girls in public secondary schools in Tharaka-Nithi County, Kenya. This study was ex-posto research which employed causal-comparative research design. The population of the study was 9,419 from three students from public secondary schools in the county. A sample of 350 respondents, comprising of 175 boys and 175 girls were involved in this study. The desired data was collected through a students' questionnaire. Validity of the instruments was ensured through judgments of research experts and scholars in the related area of study. Reliability of the research instruments was estimated through a pilot study in order to determine the internal consistency of the items. Percentages, frequency counts and t-test were adapted for data analysis by use of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 for windows. A summary was used to analyze qualitative data. The findings of the study indicated no significant differences in the impact of group conformity on academic counseling between boys and girls. Therefore, it was recommended that when secondary school students are counseled on academic matters, teacher counselors should overlook arguments on gender which explain that girls are more prone to group conformity than boys.

**Keywords:** Group conformity, Academic counseling, Group norms, Academic challenges, Gender

## 1. Introduction

Quality education is crucial in equipping learners with knowledge and skills to help them achieve their academic goals. Some students still perform poorly in national examinations despite emphasis on academic work by teachers in secondary schools (Wango & Mungai, 2007). Academic counseling is thus crucial in helping students cope with academic challenges and improve their academic work. Chartuvedi (2004) asserts that the dynamic relationship between a counselor and students provides an opportunity to exchange information designed to help students reach their educational and career goals. According to Corsin (2001), examinations and certifications are actually central to education and training processes as a means of evaluating the level of academic performance for purposes of further education, training and employment. Gladding (2004) argues that those students who meet with a teacher counselor learn concrete tools and strategies to deal with academic challenges such as low grades, test anxiety, learning difficulties, poor study skills and poor revision methods. Schmidt (2003) observes that academic counseling helps students to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to decide whether to take academic or vocational options at the end of secondary course. A study carried out by the British Association for Counseling (BAC) (2004) on the effectiveness of academic counseling revealed that students who sought academic counseling performed highly in academic work. An important factor for success in academic counseling is for a teacher counselor to establish a strong rapport with students of both genders appropriately (Maslach, Santee & Wade, 2007). This rapport is likely to facilitate an open exchange of information that is productive for identifying and solving academic challenges.

Group conformity causes members to act in accordance with group expectations with little or no overt pressure to do it (Sdorow & Rickabaugh, 2002). However, having just one group member present who shares the minority point of view is sufficient to reduce group conformity (Gray, 2002). According to Tillin and Sumerson (2005), groups that unanimously support a position show the most pronounced group conformity pressure. For example, students who unanimously support an idea to seek academic counseling show high level of group conformity. Fitting in a group provides a secure feeling of belonging, but at the extreme, group conformity can be unpleasant and even dangerous (Giddens, Duneiver & Appelbaum, 2003). It is therefore likely that students may fail to seek academic counseling out of a need to conform to groups which detest academic counseling. Although group conformity has some unpleasant aspects, it is not entirely negative since conformity to group rules and regulations allows a group to run smoothly (Santrock, 2005). Thus, students' groups may create desirable group conformity when members are expected to seek academic counseling; a prerequisite for high academic performance.

Individual members often conform to rules of groups from a desire for security within a group typical of similar age, culture, religion or educational status (Velasquez, Andre, Shanks & Meyer, 2012). Fitting in a group provides a secure feeling of belonging while unwillingness to conform carries the risk of social rejection (Aranson, Wilson & Akert, 2007). Thus, students who do not conform to rules of their groups on seeking or not seeking academic counseling are likely to be rejected by their group members. Asch's study on line judgment of 1955 on group conformity revealed that many people go along with group response even when the evidence of what they see is different from what they conform to (Fisk, 2010). Group pressure can sometimes be unpleasant and even dangerous at the extreme but can also have good effects depending on the situation (Giddens, Duneiver & Appelbaum, 2003). For instance, group conformity among students' groups may be pleasant if it causes members to seek academic counseling but can be dangerous when the rules of these groups dictate that members should not seek academic counseling.

Societal norms often establish gender differences in the way men and women conform to social influences (Fisk, 2010). There is a higher rate of group conformity among women than men which is attributed to reasons such as gender roles (Workman & Johnson, 2005). Male gender roles show that men should not conform closely with other people's opinions while it is acceptable for women to conform to group behaviors (Eagly, Wood & Fishbaugh, 2003). Part of the female gender role involves being sensitive to others, hence this role causes conformity among women in order for them to maintain harmony (Eagly, Wood & Fishbaugh, 2003). When people believe they are being observed, women tend to conform more than men (Lamberton & Kartz, 2001). Therefore, female secondary school students are likely to conform to seeking or not seeking academic counseling more than their male counterparts when a decision is made in the presence of group members.

According to Sayer, De Saintonge and Evans (2002), an efficient academic counseling system addresses gender needs and provides expert help in reducing stress and managing challenges that interfere with academic performance. A study carried out by Al-Ansari (2015) on academic seeking behaviors among Saudi students showed that females had higher tendencies for seeking academic counseling and discussing academic issues with teacher counselors than males. These tendencies were explained as females' desire in general to follow systems and conform to group rules. More females than males follow the path of least resistance and conform out of a need to be liked or accepted (Tilin & Sumerson, 2005). Thus, boys are likely to conform less to their groups on seeking or not seeking academic counseling than girls.

## 2. Objective

The objective of this study was to determine differences in the impact of group conformity on academic counseling between boys and girls in public secondary schools in Tharaka-Nithi County in Kenya.

## 3. Research Methodology

This study was a descriptive research which employed causal-comparative research design. Frankel and Wallen (2000) observe that in causal-comparative research design, the researcher's goal is to determine whether the independent variable affects the outcome, or dependent variable by comparing two or more groups of subjects. This research design was appropriate for this study because two groups; boys and girls were used to bring out a comparison on the impact that group conformity has on academic counseling. The population of the study was drawn from an accessible population of 9,419 form three students in public secondary schools in Tharaka-Nithi County (CEO, Tharaka-Nithi County, 2015). The sample size of this study was 348 form three students comprising of 175 boys and 175 girls. Stratified sampling procedure was used to sample 14 schools proportionately from the 142 public secondary schools according to sub-county categories. In addition, simple random sampling was applied to select 25 form three student respondents from each of the sampled schools. The researcher used a students' questionnaire to collect data to meet the objective of this study. To validate the instrument, the researcher checked on content, construct and face validities, and sought expertise assistance from research experts and scholars in the related field. Reliability of the instrument was estimated through a pilot study. The minimum threshold for reliability of the research instrument was set at alpha 0.7. Reliability coefficient for the instrument of the study was 0.81 which indicated that the reliability of the instrument was reliable. Descriptive statistics of frequencies and percentages were used to analyze quantitative data while qualitative data from the open-ended question was analyzed in form of a summary. Data analysis was aided by Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 for windows. The researcher obtained a letter of introduction from Chuka University and then sought a research permit from the National Commission for Science Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). The researcher sought informed consent from respondents. This is because it is recommended that informed consent be gained from all research participants (King, 2000).

## 4. Results and Discussion

Information on the distribution of students by age and gender was sought. Data analysis results are represented in Table 1.

Table 1  
 Distribution of Students by Age and Gender

Age	Boys		Girls	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
16 years and below	46	26.3	54	30.9
17 years	99	56.6	96	54.8
18 years	21	12.0	20	11.4
19 years and above	9	5.1	5	2.9
Total	175	100.0	175	100.0

The information in Table 1 indicates that majority of the students were 17 years old in both genders though higher in boys than girls. Students of 19 years and above were the lowest number in the distribution although girls were less than boys since more boys could have been admitted to secondary school at an older age than girls.

An item in the questionnaire sought to find out the group that students belonged to by gender and the findings are represented in Table 2.

Table 2  
Students' Groups by Gender

Group	Boys		Girls	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Religious movement	8	4.6	12	6.9
Co-curricular team	86	49.1	82	46.8
Students' council	7	4.0	5	2.9
Academic discussion	74	42.3	76	43.4
Total	175	100.0	175	100.0

Distribution of student's groups by gender presented in Table 2 reveals that co-curricular team was higher in males than females. Academic discussion group was the second highest in number although slightly higher in females than males. The academic group representation is supported by Eagly, Wood and Fishbaugh (2003) who assert that women are more concerned than men about interpersonal relationships. Thus, girls may gain more satisfaction than boys in academic discussion groups due to the close verbal interrelationship nature of such a group.

Information on the impact of group conformity on academic counseling between boys and girls in public secondary schools was gathered from a questionnaire. The findings on this impact are presented in Table 3.

Table 3  
Students' Position of Impact of Group Conformity on Academic Counseling

Theme	N	Boys		Girls	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Look to actions of members for clues	175	2.64	1.2492	3.62	1.4002
Change opinion to be like those of members	175	2.53	1.2933	3.33	1.4175
Accepted in group for agreeing with members' views	175	2.44	1.2968	3.32	1.3479
Often agree with the group leader	175	2.04	1.1036	3.53	1.2977
Seek counseling to please group members	175	2.06	1.1211	3.29	1.3421
Common form to seek members' opinions	175	2.52	1.3545	3.28	1.4609
Seek counseling to avoid rejection	175	2.51	1.4049	3.89	1.0989
Match opinions with those of members to keep friends	175	2.53	1.4170	3.47	1.2933
Feel close and appreciated when I conform	175	2.75	1.5402	3.80	1.1614
Seek counseling to be liked by members	175	2.41	1.2907	3.05	1.3527
Valid N (Listwise)	175				

Information in Table 3 reveals means and standard deviations of respondents' agreements to levels of conformity to their groups. Students were required to indicate their agreement on views of group members about seeking or not seeking academic counseling so that they could be accepted in their groups. Respondents also indicated the levels to which they sought academic counseling so that they could be liked by group members. Results from these two items suggested that group conformity had a low impact in boys and moderate impact in girls. These views are also supported by Tilin and Sumerson (2005) who affirm that more females than males follow the path of least resistance and conform out of a need to be liked and accepted. Students responded to agreement levels about seeking opinions of group members on whether to seek or not seek academic counseling. Another item required respondents to indicate their agreement about individuals matching group members' opinions about seeking or not seeking academic counseling to avoid losing friends. Results from these two items depicted that group conformity had a moderate impact among both boys and girls; indicating no difference in the impact of group conformity on academic counseling between boys and girls. These findings contradict with Eagly, Wood and Fishbaugh (2003) who maintain that male gender roles show that men do not conform closely to other people's opinions

while it is acceptable for women to do so in group behaviors. Impact of group conformity on academic counseling between boys and girls was compared by use of a t- test. The findings of the t- test are presented in Table 4.

Table 4  
 Summary of T-test Results on the Impact of Group Conformity on Academic Counseling

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t- value	Df	P-value
Male	175	2.44	0.2289	-9.293	346	0.543
Female	175	3.46	0.2581			

The test on the hypothesis presented in Table 4 reveals a p- value of 0.543 which is more than the value at a level of significance of alpha 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted to imply that there is no statistical significant difference in the impact of group conformity on academic counseling between boys and girls. These results contradict with Rubenstein (2005) who points out that many cultures present males as of higher status than females hence the male gender conforms less. There is insignificant difference in the impact of group conformity on academic counseling between boys and girls because students, regardless of gender, desired to be liked by group members to avoid rejection from their groups. Aranson, Wilson and Akert (2007) affirm that fitting in a group provides a secure feeling of belonging while unwillingness to conform carries the risk of social rejection.

Individual group member's act of matching their opinions with those of their colleagues in order to keep friends indicated no significant difference between boys and girls. This view contradicts with Eagly, Wood and Fishbaugh (2003) who assert that women are more concerned than men about interpersonal relationships. Boys and girls looked to the actions of group members for clues about seeking or not seeking academic counseling at similar degree which caused insignificant difference in the impact of group conformity on academic counseling. This view contradicts with Young (2007) who maintain that women are more accurate than men at decoding non-verbal communication. Thus, girls are more likely than boys to conform because they learn nonverbally from group members whether the position of the group is for members to seek or not seek academic counseling. These views are supported by a study carried out by Santee and Jackson in 1982 which concluded that females assess conformity as a more positive, self-defining act than males do, hence females conform more (Tischler, 2004).

Respondents' feelings of closeness and appreciation by group members when they followed their groups' positions brought about the insignificant difference in the impact of group conformity on academic counseling between boys and girls. This view is contradicted by Fisk (2010) who maintains that social norms often establish gender differences in the way men and women conform to social influences. Students' position of agreement with what the group leader said about seeking or not seeking academic counseling implicated insignificant difference in the impact of group conformity between the two genders. These views are unsupported by Al-Ansari (2015) who affirms that females' high tendencies for conforming to group rules more than males is as a result of females' general desire to follow systems and conform to rules.

The general question sought respondents' opinions about conformity to their groups. The opinion was crucial because it revealed the perception of group conformity by students. Group members stated that conforming to their groups towards seeking academic counseling caused improvement academically and brought about unity among group members. However, group conformity expectations that required members not to seek academic counseling suggested negatively that members avoided time wastage and created academic independence.

### 5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Differences in the impact of group conformity on academic counseling between boys and girls were determined in the study. Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that group conformity has an impact on academic counseling though the impact is higher in girls than boys. Females desire to be accepted in groups, keeping friendships and maintaining group cohesion more than males; so they conform more to their groups. Thus, female students conform to seek or not seek academic counseling more than male students and are likely to handle academic challenges better than the males when they conform towards seeking academic counseling. However, the t- test on the differences in the impact of group conformity on academic counseling between boys and girls revealed that there is no statistical significant difference in this impact between the two genders.

The researcher recommended the Ministry of Education Science and Technology to put in place and enhance policies that ensure learner effective academic counseling environments. This could be achieved through conducting sessions in schools on how groups impact on academic counseling. Teacher counselors need to design academic counseling programs aimed at facilitating students' positive attitude towards academic counseling. This may be accomplished through open talks on group conformity and its impact on academic counseling.

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