

# What Is the Conformity-Nonconformity Dichotomy?

Sándor Karikó

University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary

This paper argues that the conformity-nonconformity dichotomy is a false dilemma. This study first critically reviews the basic philosophical, ethical, social psychological, and pedagogical literature related to the two concepts. It then outlines the way to overcome the phenomena of conformism and nonconformism together. The description of conformity and nonconformity as deprivation of freedom becomes stronger in 20th century philosophy and special literature from Heidegger through Fischer's definition up to Cooley, and Crutchfield. Conformity is the sinking of the Self into the Anyone, the unprincipled alignment to the opinion of group mates, and nonconformity is the unprincipled resistance to it. But what is beyond conformity and nonconformity together as a group? There is a real community, in it the transformation of our pedagogical culture in a both useful and reasonable manner to allow the youth to accept the world by denying it and to deny the world by accepting it. The real community involves the virtue of goodness. Educate for goodness, because we possibly are the honest and humane man, who disregards the sinking of the self into the anyone and the self-contained rebellion.

*Keywords:* conformity, nonconformity, goodness, virtue, education

## Some Previous Remarks

The “profane” meaning of conformity is first provided by American philosopher and liberal thinker William Penn, in his work dated from around 1700. According to him, conformism is a civil virtue whose price is the loss of freedom (Penn, 1693-1718). Later Emerson (1932), also an American thinker, repeats Penn's statement according to him: the citizens renounce their freedom and culture. Sociologist E. Fischer (1964) deforms so thus: the sinking of the Self into the Anybody is conformism. And if Castoriadis' (1994) assertion, that we are witnessing the most conformist period of modern history, is true, then it is even more important to focus on this problem—important for politics, sciences, and pedagogy (education of youth).

I believe, the question of conformity and nonconformity can be connected in many equally important ways. Yet, it is incomprehensible, or at least strange to me, that both conformism (nonconformism) and pedagogy (education) research today still lacks a systematic and deepened analysis of the mutual effects of these two “notions” on each other. In the mind of conformism researchers the value system of education assumes tertiary importance, and pedagogy researchers mostly pretend that conformity does not even appear in the field of education, even in the better case, they merely mention the phenomenon. However, they easily skip over problems appearing in connection with education and conformity. It is well known that it is impossible to jump over

---

Comment: this study is an improved and further thought version of my previous publication entitled Conformist Mass Society or Non-Conformist Rebellion? (*International Dialogues on Education*, 2020, Volume 7, Number 2, pp. 9-23).

Sándor Karikó, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Gyula Juhász Faculty of Pedagogy, Institute of Applied Pedagogy, Department of Preschool Education, University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary.

research phases without a price, so here we have to make do with highlighting a single viewpoint, which concerns connecting conformity (nonconformity) and school education.

Let us start out from the classic dilemma of school education. What is the most important question, the pattern providing norm, the task to be realised for the school? “Breeding” the “polite”, well-educated student who causes few problems, adapts to everything and is therefore predictable? Or “breeding” the always critically-thinking autonomous student who stands on his or her own feet, rebelling, but for that very reason inconvenient? Or perhaps developing the youth of a real community spirit and mentality? It is not difficult to see that all the three behaviour types are realistic although they represent different weight, value, pedagogic-ethical principle and virtue.

The conformity-research has thousands of problems (Karikó 2008). For this once I can stress the importance of the dilemma: the dichotomy of conformity and nonconformity.

### **Conformity as Losing Freedom**

From the standpoint of philosophy we have to go back to the statement of Heidegger. He wrote:

In this way, the “they” disburdens Dasein in its everydayness, ...but disburdening it of its being, the “they” accommodates Dasein in its tendency to take things easily and make them easy. (...) Everyone is the other, and no one is himself. The “they”, which supplies the answer to the *who* of everyday Dasein, is the nobody to whom every Dasein has always already surrendered its itself, in its being-among-one-another. (Heidegger, 2010, p. 124)

From many researchers having reflected on the above-mentioned ideas of Heidegger, let me highlight the ideas of two of them. The less known Thomas Barfuss interprets the ideas of the authors of *Being and Time* in his book on conformity: Mr. Dasein and Mrs. Dasein were unable to find the escape route from conformity (Barfuss, 2002). After all, it is obviously the negative meaning of conformity. For example, Peters puts the fundamental question: who is a conformist? What is conformism? A conformist is a person who does not have his own principles and actions. He adapts to any groups in “chameleon-like” manner. The conformist action is hideously corrupting virtuous life (Peters, 1974).

The negative meaning of conformity gets stronger in the social-sciences (especially in the sociology, social-psychology, politology, pedagogy). Let us see some marked opinions! Wolfgang Lipp, a member of the Department of Sociology at Bielefeld University edited an international selection from the topic of conformism. He emphasised that it was sociology that raised the phenomenon of conformism and nonconformism from its historical context and made it the law of life of society (Lipp, 1975). According to Kon (he was a Russian sociologist) conformism is an imperfect form of collectivism (Kon, 1978). His colleague, Ivanov continued the interpretation: conformism is the inevitable subordination of the personality to the exterior, officially approved clichés and standards. It is the form of existence of a pared-down personality (Ivanov, 1980).

I can carry on the concrete quotations (S. Asch, M. Deutsch, Wiswede, Kiesler-brother and sister and so on), but it is obviously the negative content. Still I would like to refer to Hungarian pedagogical works separately, too. Several researchers write on the problem of conformism of Hungarian students.

Unfortunately the Hungarian pedagogical research has not really or pusillanimously dealt with the correlations of the themes of school-conformity and school-autonomy. It is not a coincidence that the question of school and conformity was not scrutinized first (meaning the last few decades of the last century) by researchers of pedagogy. The representatives of and those who were responsible for pedagogy did not say a word. Although

we have experienced and experience (nowadays, too) it in everyday life of the school-function. László Lengyel is a Hungarian economist, but he has made an important pedagogical remark about students. What can we read in his criticism about the higher education? At restricted mass universities, in an imitating and colonial system, the mass production of prefabricated and conformist students was taking place (Lengyel, 2001). The conformism problem remained unchanged, but in the last few decades something has happened in the frameworks of pedagogy. It seems that pedagogy is starting to recognise the issue. A self-critical attitude can be observed in a book published in 2017: a traditional pedagogical practice forcing students to take a passive and receptive position reigns, children must adapt to the school and not the other way around. Our educational system is in a rather narrow state, and that has serious repercussions. All influential participants have given up their integrity (Radó 2017). Let me quote the harsh criticism of the pedagogy researcher János Szűdi. He wrote (he died after having published his book) in his ironic book entitled *Let's Make a Bad School!*:

In an education system serving the interest of the political power, there is no freedom of education, there are no free schools. The child feels good in school if he feels that what is happening there serves his best interests, if he feels that he has equal rights in the community, he is a respected member of it, and if he feels that he is part and not the passive subject of the learning process. (Szűdi, 2019, p. 7)

Based on the facts mentioned above, I would like to offer the following definition: *conformity is a kind of adaptation which comes with the mutilation and many times complete denial of the Self, it is the manifestation of subservience and compromise*, by which the individual loses and denies his own conviction, integrity, and freedom. Its consequence is that he does not know anymore who he actually is.

In relation to the above-mentioned conception of conformity, let me make an important the social-political remark! Evidently, the problem of conformity is not only the education-question. It is a heavy social and political dilemma, too.

In Hungarian public awareness and public life, one usually comes across the overwhelming argument that in Hungary during the period of the regime change (end of the 1980s, beginning of the 1990s) the conformity problem became more accentuated. The phenomenon of a large number of citizens becoming conformists caught one's eye: they changed their point of view, conviction, and behaviour without any problem, often several times. As they said and wrote: the road to Damascus has become crowded (referring to the biblical events when Saul suddenly became Paul). I consider it important even if I do not agree with those who utilise the similitude of the Road to Damascus to describe the phenomenon. Becoming Paul—in accordance with the original story—is not an example of opportunism, as he had fundamentally changed, his inner self had been completely transformed, and he had become a new person in all respects. Citizens can go through such a genuine, open, critical, and self-critical transformation: every person has the right to go through that. The individual who experiences such an alteration cannot be regarded as a conformist. Nevertheless, the person who alters easily and repeatedly throws out his or her convictions, principles, and behaviour patterns with no remorse, can be called conformist.

To sum the study up till now, I can ask in general: what is the link among conformism, altering things, and adapting to the living conditions? I am sure that human adaptation has such a form in which the individual's integrity and level of freedom are curbed or we do not want to make use of all our abilities, skills, and resources. This resignation, this conception (and practice) of human adaptation can be contested from a philosophical, historical viewpoint and condemned from a moral one.

### **Nonconformity as Rebellion (Against Conformity)?**

It is usually in opposition to the “polite”, conformist student that we place the rebellious, always complaining and criticising type. The former behaviour is preferred by the institution and the older generation, while the younger generation tries to accept its conformism reluctantly, or also to hide it shyly. The latter in turn is rather uncomfortable and disturbing to the teacher, however, students attribute a great value to it and try to interpret and follow it as a heroic act. Among them it seems chic to be a nonconformist and a behaviour rejecting everything becomes a tendency. It is common knowledge that for a young person the world is “out of joint”, and it is he or she who is ready and willing to reinterpret and reshape it. At this stage of life and vocation we are only a step from rebellion, from ruthless and logical criticism of the existing values, ideals, customs, life techniques and modes and cultures, the myth of unconditional negation, to nonconformism. This is how the youth, or student who always rejects everything and adapts to nothing becomes an ideal, or at least imposing. The student therefore who says “no” to the parent, teacher, and author believes that his/her independence and eccentricity lead to happiness and welfare. These students make themselves believe that this is the way they become great and “divine” to their peers. To the rebelling, nonconformist student, it seems that his/her constant, non-selecting criticism, brave resistance is the promise for his/her independent and free thought and acts, in other words, autonomy.

It seems that the problem of nonconformity is absorbed in life of youth. The sociologist, Cooley, set the tone for the theoretical foundations: Youth glories in nonconformity (Cooley, 1967). Later, the students firmly declared their goal: breaking with the tradition, conformity, order, and formalities: they wanted passion, blood and real life (Feuer, 1969). Thinktank, drew his conclusions from 1968 in the following manner? Youth must be non-conformism! (Michnik, 1998) And what happened in the life of rebellious young people? One could experience that, for example, the rebellion of the 68’s West German students had transformed back into conformity by the middle of the 1970s. At that time a new philosophy of life was starting to become popular: “Dear God. Make me spineless, so that I can work in the Civil Service”. One should not be surprised that the majority of student leaders were integrated into the state “mechanism”, into the Civil Administration or into State agencies. It is obvious that one cannot fight against Conformism with nonconformism.

Theoretically, it turns out that many researchers question the justification of the establishment of the conformity-nonconformity opposition. First of all, let me refer to the excelling social psychologist, Crutchfield, who wittily pointed out the false dilemma of the dichotomy. According to this researcher, conformity is the unprincipled alignment to the opinion of group mates, and non-conformity is the unprincipled resistance to it (Crutchfield, 1955). To put it differently, these two forms of adaptation have a common origin, it is given up autonomy and depending always on the others. Thus, conformity is thinking and doing what the others are professing and doing, nonconformity is taking a position which is opposed to that of the others. In both cases, one is led by the opinion of the others, not by one’s own conviction. Consequently, nonconformists are actually similar to one another as are conformists. The borderlines between these two forms completely merge into each other, one can easily switch between them. György Lukács, a well-known Hungarian philosopher, summarizes his book (which he wrote in his life of last 15 years) that in modern societies nonconformist conformists emerge (Lukács, 1976).

It is clear to me these two concepts are relative: one cannot go beyond the boundaries of one of them with the order, as they are not the oppositions of each other. In this context, one must pay attention to the remarks of two social psychologist siblings: the laymen often think of conformity as a personality trait; there are the

conformers and then there are the nonconformers. Whether the layman thinks of himself as a conformer or not may depend upon whom he is comparing himself to. If he is considering himself relative to those he considers beatniks, hippies, or bums, he is staunch conformer—he is not, in his own eyes, one of those awful nonconformers who are likely to reject mother, God, and Country all at once. However, if he is asked if he believes in “changes for the better” (whatever they are), he will suddenly assume that he is a brave nonconformer unshackled by inhibitions and fears of the old fogies. While we often are attracted by the idea of conformity as an enduring personality trait, we may be unwilling to accept it in ourselves (C. A. Kiesler & S. B. Kiesler, 1969). Namely these concepts (conformity, nonconformity) are relative, there is no real opposition between them: the dilemma of conformity and/or nonconformity is a pseudo one. One can only agree that it is not a personality trait.

What does evidence issue from these dilemma for pedagogy? Pedagogy (as a theory and practice) has to break with both the constraints of conformist education and the pseudo-glory of the nonconformist attitude. Conformism is comfortable and “pays off”, but in reality it is humiliating in that it deprives one of, or decreases freedom. Nonconformism is a behaviour proudly assumed, which even gives us a sense of bravery, however, in reality it is an activity leading to destruction and anarchy. The question arises automatically: how could school educational work on overcoming the false extremes of conformist and nonconformist adaptation, what behaviour type could it present in opposition to both? I believe that many education researchers and practising pedagogues could accept Lőránd remark (he was an excellent pedagogic-research). The transformation of our pedagogical culture is both useful and reasonable in a manner to allow the youth to accept the world by denying it and to deny the world by accepting it. If the denial of reality becomes stronger, the individual will become marginalised. In contrast, if reality is accepted, the individual will give up on his sovereignty and will become conformist (Lőránd, 1999).

The above-mentioned quotations (the ideas of Lőránd) indirectly imply the pedagogical aspect, namely the examination of my objective (the big or even the biggest challenge of education): the aspect of education, the formation of the “Polite, Rebellion and Autonomous Individual.” In fact, one could launch the pedagogical research on conformism and all the related correlations from this starting point. It seems evident to me that the polite person is the conformist, the rebellious one is the nonconformist, and the autonomous individual is the positive example with the help of which or whom one can fight against both conformity and nonconformity.

### **In the Current of Solving**

As it appears to me the way of exemption from this dichotomy is the creation of community, the establishment of true, real, authentic communities. In a real community there is actually no place for either conformity or nonconformity. Both of them are distorted form of adaptation, and the community does not consider its members as subordinated servants but autonomous individuals. The individuals collaborate together in this community. The autonomous becomes natural, central, and an important value.

Very important is a lesson for pedagogy—in my theme respect—is that the student (as of course everybody else) should adapt to the world (family, school, basic social norms) but at all costs should avoid head bowing and should not even give up on the illusion of sovereignty. At the same time, the student must not adapt to displeasing phenomena, unconditional authoritarianism, bad habits, unjust and untrue values, and at the same time should value and assume the real values, virtues, even though they may have been true since old times. What we need is a delicate balance, a differentiated understanding, judgement and implementation of adaptation and nonadaptation.

I would like to emphasise once again the importance of real, genuine communities. Pedagogy with its simple tools should press so that the school, and in a broader sense the entire society, could recognise and acknowledge that real community will only be strong, firm, and rich if it feeds on the creative energy, diverse abilities, and will of its members. And vice versa: diverse personal abilities and capabilities can only grow in the grounds of intimate co-operation, that is a community. That is how community and the individual can harmonise and that is how the false dichotomy, structured by the state, of the superior community and the inferior individual can be overcome.

The real, authentic community has still one very important virtue: namely the goodness. The ideal of goodness as a virtue appears in the history of philosophy and in educational philosophy.

Goodness as an endeavour is an integral part of education: linking the ideal, virtue of goodness to the essence of education is not an induced and aggressive process. Not only do they tolerate each other, but they mutually reinforce one another, so one might say that they live in symbiosis. The most obvious, punctual, and beautiful description of this connection cannot be read either in philosophy or in educational philosophy, not even in pedagogy (theory of education), but in an essay of a Hungarian writer. He is Milán Füst, a 20th century Hungarian writer. I cannot resist not mentioning this reference in his diary to which I have raised the attention several times. I shall quote him somewhat in detail, let me remark that the unique excerpt from the writer can serve as an indispensable resource for all teachers. It is regrettable that such thoughts of Milán Füst have been disregarded by researchers on pedagogy (and maybe practising pedagogues). I have already cited the thought of Füst in my previous studies several times (Karikó, 2022), but I would like to refer to it once again because of his perspicaciousness.

They preach in school with no effect, there is none either when the priest, your mother or father tells you to be good, (...) you decide in your childhood you will be good, clean and unselfish for nothing... Life comes—and you have forgotten now—you cheat, steal, live for pleasures. (...) You are tricky, pusillanimous. (...) But the education that I have got from my mother, the idealism ignorant of life that I received while being breastfed (...) But life is—unfortunately—not like this. (...) And do you believe your mother did not know life? She knew—but still (...) she wanted to share the better of herself (...), faith risen up from her because her child can be—*must* be free and clean. (...) And when you will have a child:—you (...) will be careful (...) to reveal the horrible, ... and you will point at life the way just like Moses did with the promised land to the hopeful. (Füst, 1976, pp.178-179)

I believe the “sine qua non” of all pedagogical work is the ambition and effort for goodness. I consider the above-mentioned text as a wonderful pedagogical creed. Education is the mechanism, expression of goodness. In this manner, it is not an exaggeration at all to say: the solemn ideal, superior virtue of goodness creates the exceptional world of education, its veritable mystery, in my opinion.

### Instead of Conclusion

Return to the problem of conformity, Lindner asked 67 years ago must you conform? (Lindner, 1956). My strong-minded answer is: no. We must not conform! And I can say finally: I believe in fundamentally the way of overcoming both conformism and nonconformism in forming communities.

### References

- Barfuss, T. (2002). *Conformity and bizarre consciousness*. Hamburg: Argument Verlag.
- Castoriadis, C. (1994). En mal duu culture. *Espit*, October, p. 48.
- Cooley, C. H. (1967). *Human nature and the social order*. United States, New York: Schocken Books.

- Crutchfield, R. (1955). Conformity and character. *The American Psychologist*, 10, 191-198.
- Emerson, R. W. (1932). *Essays. First Sevilis self-reliance*. Washington National Home Library Foundation.
- Feuer, L. S. (1969). *The conflict of generations*. New York, London: Basic Books, Inc.
- Fischer, E. (1964). *A fiatal nemzedék problémái. (Problems of the young generation)*. Budapest: Gondolat.
- Füst, M. (1976). *Napló I* (Diary, Vol. 1). Budapest: Magvető.
- Heidegger, M. (2010). *Being and time*. United States, New York: Sunny Press.
- Ivanov, V. G. (1980). Collectivism or conformism. Lenizdat (PhD dissertation).
- Kant, I. (1991). *A gyakorlati és kritikája. (Critique of pure reason)*. Budapest: Gondolat.
- Kant, I. (2005). *Antropológiai íráskok. (Antropology from a pedagogy point of view)*. Budapest: Osiris-Gond-Cura Alapítvány.
- Karikó, S. (2008). *Konformitás és nevelés. (Conformity and education)*. Budapest: Okker Kft.
- Karikó, S. (2020). What can one receive from philosophy and pedagogy? (Reflections on the courage of the spirit and eminence of the soul). *Pedagogical Almanac*, 31(2), 15-24.
- Karikó, S. (2021). Happines as goodness. *Pedagogical Almanac*, 29, 165.
- Karikó, S. (2022). The mystery of education. International dialogues on education: Past and present. *IDE-Online Journal*, 9(2), 128-146.
- Kiesler, C. A., & Kiesler, S. B. (1969). *Conformity*. Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Kon, I. (1978). *Átkritikje "Ja"*. Moszkva: Izdatelsztvo politiceszkij lityeraturi.
- Lengyel, L. (2001). *Fiatal farkasok iskolái. (Schools of young wolves)*. Budapest: 168 óra.
- Lindner, R. M. (1956). *Must you conform?* New York: Rinehart Publishing House.
- Lipp, W. (1975). *Konformismus-Nonkonformismus. (Conformism-nonconformism)*. *Sociologische Texte* 93. Luchterhand: Darmstadt-Neuwied.
- Lóránd, F. (1999). *Az emberi minőség tisztelete a komprehenzív iskolában. (Respecting human quality in comprehensive school)*. Új Pedagógiai Szemle.
- Lukács, G. (1976). *A társadalmi lét ontológiai kérdése. (Discourse on the ontology of social existence)*. Budapest: Magvető.
- Michnik, A. (1998). Interview to Hungarian Newspaper, May 30, 1998.
- Penn, W. (1971). *Conformity and deviation*. Berg and Bass (Eds.). New York, Foreword: Harper and Brothers Publishers. In German: *W. Penn: Frikhte der Einsamkeit*. Heidelberg: Karl Winters Universitaats Buchhandlung. Der Konformist.
- Peters, R. (1974). *Psychology and ethical development*. London: Georg Allen and Unwin LTD.
- Pring, R. (2004). *Philosophy of education*. London, New York: Continuum.
- Radó, P. (2017). *Az iskola jövője. (The future of the school)*. Budapest: Noran Libro.
- Szűdi, J. (2019). *Csináljunk rossz iskolát! (Let's make bad school!)*. Budapest: Wesley János.