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Adolescent Conformist Behaviour in Making Aesthetic Judgments under Pressure of Authority Figures and Peer Pressure²

Extended summary

The aim of the present research was to determine whether the adolescent aesthetic judgments are prone to group pressure and whether there is a difference in their conformist behaviour, depending on whether the pressure group is composed of peers or scientific authorities. Additionally, we wanted to indirectly assess the achievement of the specific goals of the teaching of fine arts, such as the ability of students to perceive the quality of visual elements, the development of aesthetic values and the ability of students to express and provide arguments for their opinion. The research procedure was based on Ash's experimental paradigm which was modified to a certain extent. The groups consisted of five participants, four of them always being collaborators of the experimenter, while only the fifth one was a true, "naive", participant. Twelve pairs of paintings were presented to the subjects using the projector. In each pair, one painting was a lesser-known work by artists recognized in art history, while the other was an amateur painting work. Participants' task was to evaluate which image in each pair had a higher

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aesthetic value (aesthetic judgements in a narrower sense) and to say which image they would keep in their own room (aesthetic judgements in a broader sense). The experimenter's collaborators were told to give the same answers by choosing the image with a lesser aesthetic value in eight cases. In four cases they were instructed to choose a painting with a higher aesthetic value so that the "naive" participants do not get suspicious.

The sample consisted of 52 participants of Petnica Research Centre divided into three groups: a control group, which made the judgements independently, in writing, and two experimental groups, one of which made judgments in the presence of scientific authorities and the other one in the presence of their peers. Subsequently, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the participants to check the level of conformation awareness.

In the case when asked about the aesthetic value in the narrower sense and the collaborators of the experimenter chose uglier paintings, 22.8% of the "naive" participants in the peer group and 38.11% in the authority group also chose uglier paintings, while the number of errors (choosing the uglier paintings) in the control group was only 4.5%. These findings support the assumption that the subjects conform to the influence of group pressure in the process of making aesthetic judgements. When it comes to the question of which painting to put on the wall (aesthetic judgements in a broader sense), the situation is somewhat different. In this case, the control group made a slightly higher percentage of errors (11.3%), and the difference between the two experimental groups was smaller in absolute terms: 24.7% of uglier paintings were selected in the peer group, compared to 34.2% in the authority group. In order to determine the significance of these differences, we performed a one-factor analysis of variance. Only the responses for the paintings for which the experimenter's collaborators selected the painting with the lower aesthetic value were taken into account while the total number of the selected "uglier" paintings was taken as the "naive" participants' score. The analysis of the variance revealed the group effect on the selection of paintings with a lower aesthetic value for both questions (the aesthetic value of the paintings and which painting to put on the wall), and the post hoc test (LSD test) confirmed statistically significant differences between all three groups only in the task of the aesthetical judgement in the narrower sense, suggesting that the participants who were in the authority group conformed more to the majority judgments than those who were in the peer group. The question of which of the two images would a person put on a wall revealed a statistically significant difference only between the control and the two experimental groups, but not between the two experimental groups, which suggests that the type of conformism behind these processes is in fact informational conformism. The differences in the respondents' awareness of social pressure were not found to be significant in this study, and such awareness was not even registered.

Finally, we conclude that even highly motivated and selected high school students who are encouraged to think independently during special programs are relatively often prone to conforming when it comes to the aesthetic judgement without being aware of it. Although this research does not meet the requirements of the evaluative studies of educational achievement due to its design and sample, it indirectly answered the question of the aesthetic taste of our participants and the achievement of the goals and the objectives of the Fine Arts subject such as: developing the ability of students to express and explain their opinions about artistic works,

to perceive the quality of the visual elements, and so on. Since the participants in the experimental groups choose a less aesthetically valuable image as a more beautiful one in almost one third of the situations, we can conclude that the mentioned teaching goals have not been fully achieved in this group. In order to be more prepared to make independent aesthetic judgments, it is recommended to encourage students through art education, to carefully observe and analyze the characteristics of works of art (composition, form, technique, the message of the artist), exchange their opinions with others, explain the criteria on the basis of which they evaluate the value of the work and compare it with the criteria accepted and validated throughout art history. We assume that such an approach to the teaching of Fine Arts would have positive effects not only on the aesthetic taste of the students, but also on their capacity to relate reflectively and critically to various contents in their experience.

Keywords: conformist behaviour, aesthetic judgment, adolescents, authority, peers.

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