Moral Reasoning in Conformity to Group Norms

Helen B. Poulsen & A. Rebecca Neal-Beevers, Ph.D..
The University of Texas at Austin

Introduction

- Moral Reasoning Ability (MRA) is the process by which people determine that one course of action is morally right vs. wrong (Rest, 1979).
- Conformity is a change in behavior to match the beliefs, expectations, or behaviors of a real or imagined other (Cialdini & Trost, 1998).
- In past studies of group conformity, subjects made remarks, attributing their responses to feelings of moral obligation (Asch, 1951; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Saltzstein, Diamond, & Belenky, 1972).
- **This study investigates the effect of one's moral reasoning ability (MRA) on yielding to social pressure.**
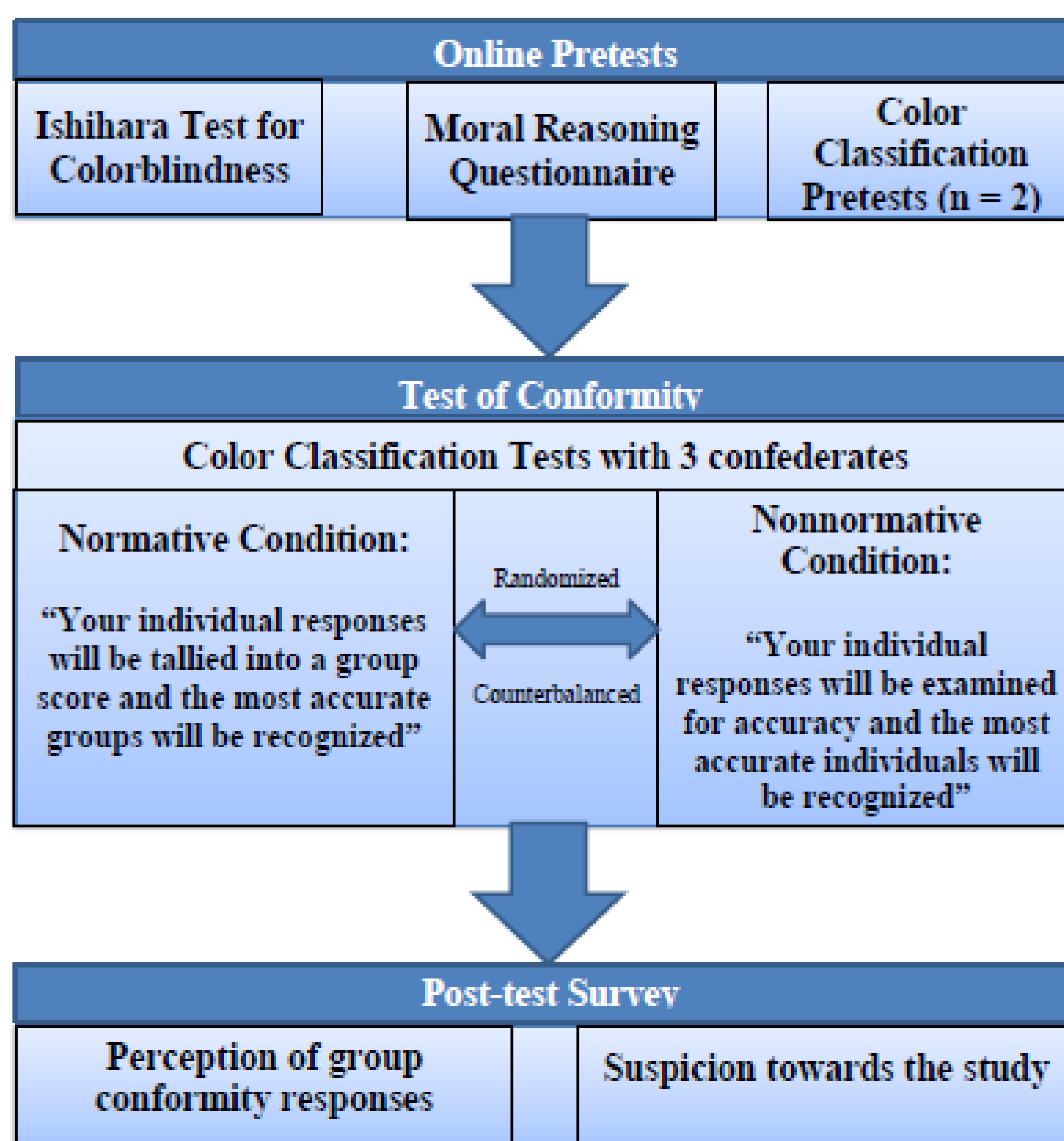
Hypotheses

- Conformity behavior will be negatively correlated with MRA
  - In a group condition where members are **interdependent of one another (normative)**, conformity behavior will be higher than in a group condition where members are **independent of one another (nonnormative).**
    - Lower discrepancies between conformity behavior in each condition will be associated with lower MRA.
    - Females will tend to conform more than males.
    - No gender differences will be present in MRA.

Methods

Subjects
- 50 undergraduate students (36% male, 64% female) enrolled in introductory psychology courses at The University of Texas at Austin.

Procedure

Online Pretests		
Ishihara Test for Colorblindness	Moral Reasoning Questionnaire	Color Classification Pretests (n = 2)

Test of Conformity
Color Classification Tests with 3 confederates

Normative Condition:	Randomized / Counterbalanced	Nonnormative Condition:
"Your individual responses will be tallied into a group score and the most accurate groups will be recognized"		"Your individual responses will be examined for accuracy and the most accurate individuals will be recognized"

Post-test Survey	
Perception of group conformity responses	Suspicion towards the study

Methods (cont.)

Assessments

Independent Variable
Moral Reasoning Ability was assessed with the Defining Issues Test 2 (DIT2) (Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 1999)--an objective test based on Kohlberg's theory of moral development. The N2 index (extent to which an individual is acquiring more sophisticated moral thinking) was used to reflect MRA, with higher scores expressing more sophisticated moral reasoning.

Dependent Variable
Conformity was assessed with the color classification test (adopted from Collin, Di Sano, & Malik, 1994). It consisted of:

- 6 critical trials (ambiguous colors)
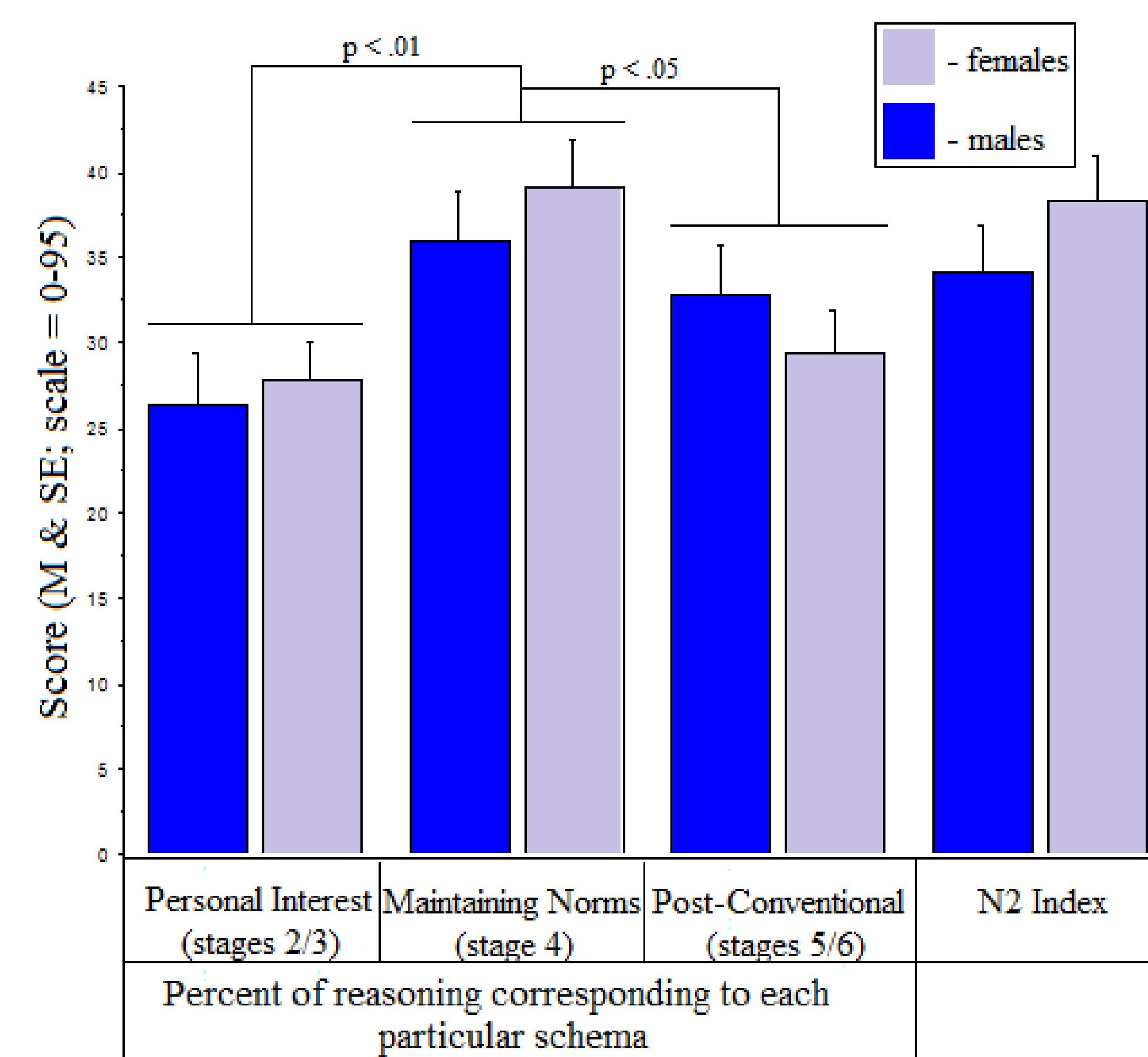- 4 neutral trials (unambiguous colors)

Confederates answers were opposite subject's pretest answers

Confederates answers = subject's pretest answer

- Conformity = Agreement with confederates on critical trials
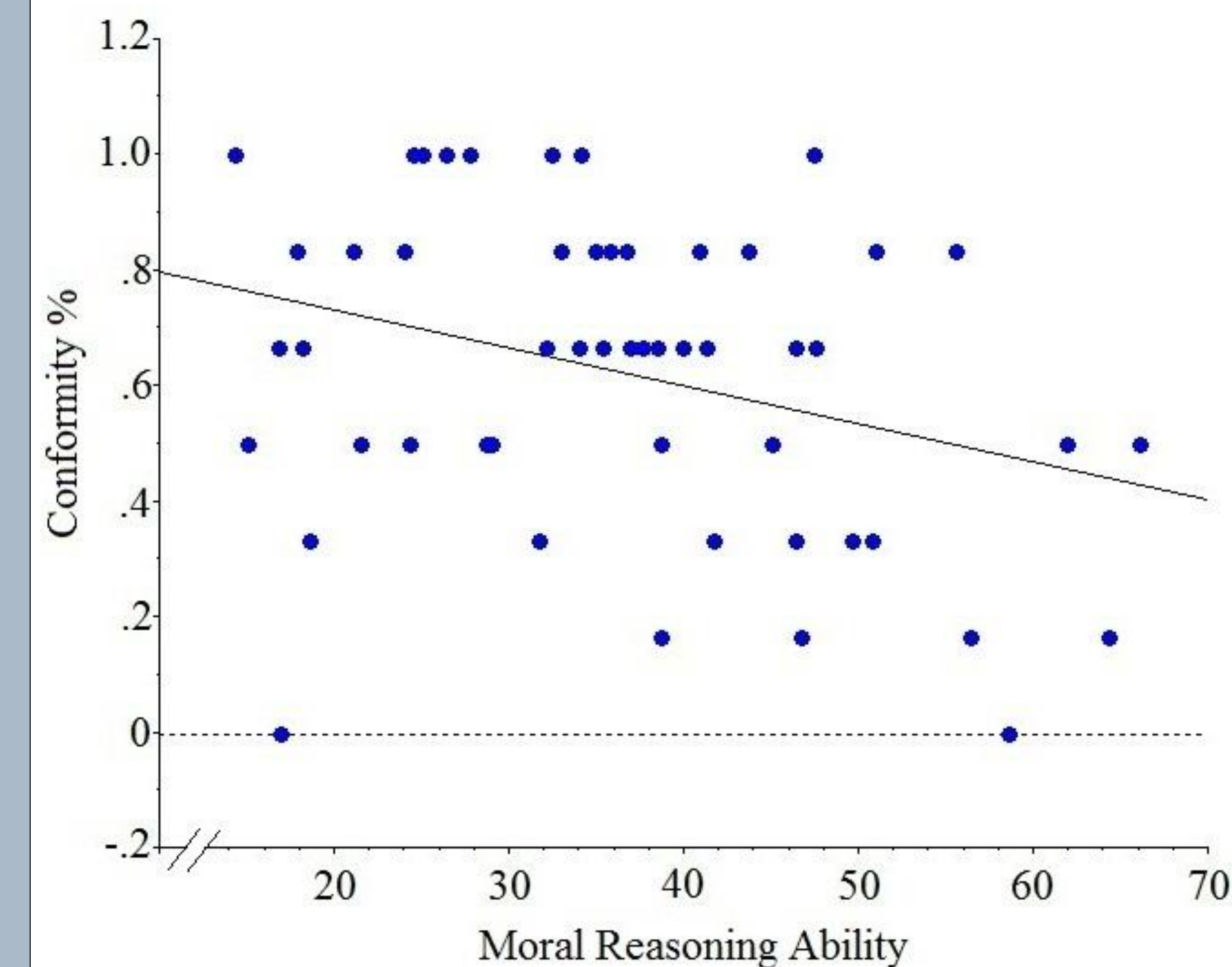
Results

Moral reasoning scores show the majority of participants' reasoning corresponds to the maintaining norms (stage 4) schema.
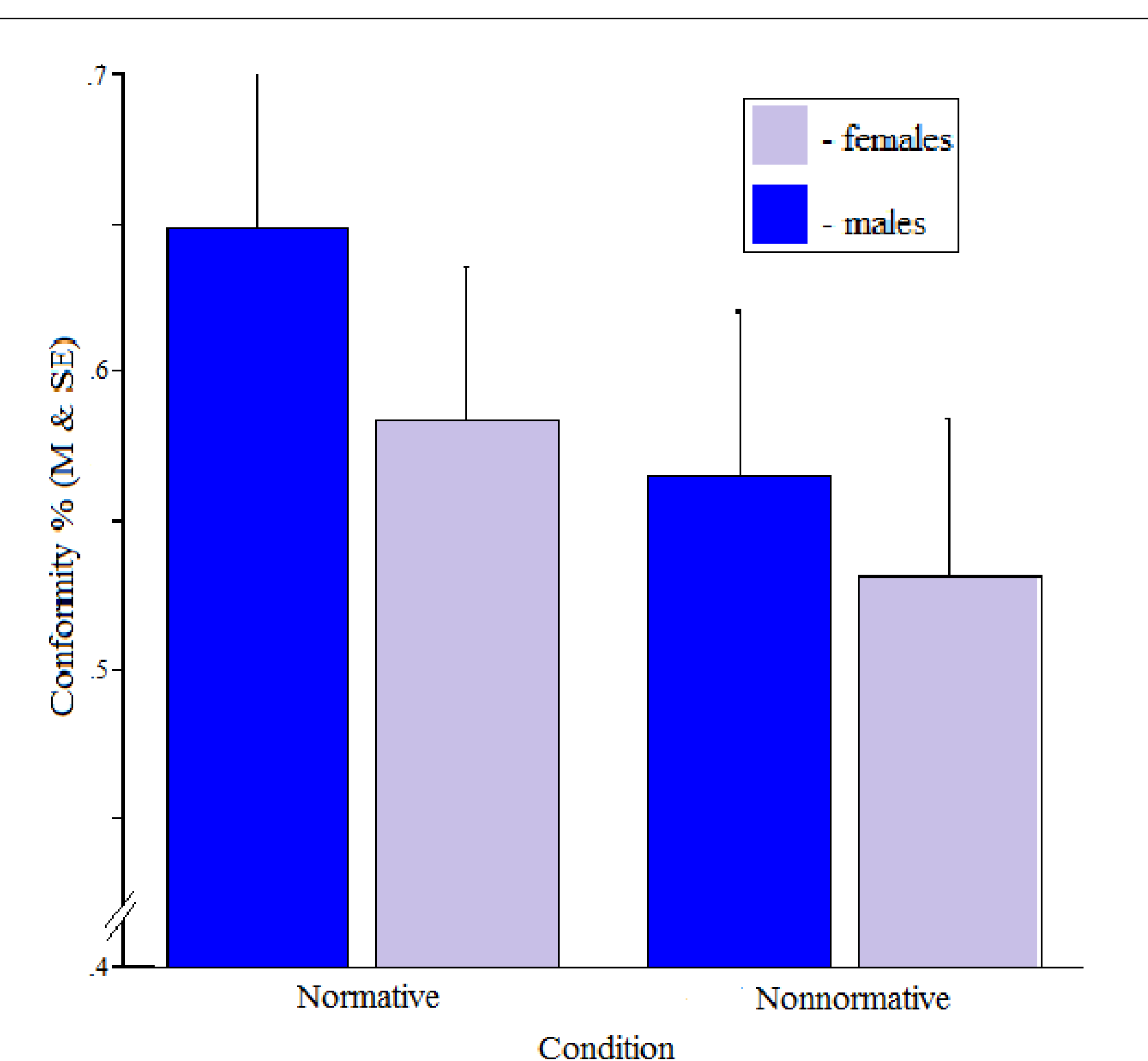
No significant gender differences were found among schema or N2 scores. Independent *t*-tests show the majority of participants use maintaining norms schema more than personal interest (p < .01) and post-conventional (p < .05).

Results (cont.)

Moral reasoning ability was found to be a significant predictor of conformity behavior in the normative condition, showing a negative correlation

In a linear regression analysis, MRA scores were found to be a significant predictor of conformity percentages, $b = -.305$, $t(48) = -2.218$, $p = .0313$. MRA explained 9.3 % of variance in conformity behavior ($R^2 = .093$, $F(1, 48) = 4.92$, $p = .0313$).

Conformity behavior was more frequent in the normative (group goal) condition; there were no significant gender differences.

A repeated-measures ANOVA showed significant differences in conformity between condition (F(1, 48) = 5.552, p = .0226), but not condition order or gender.

Results (cont.)

When the survey item **"do others have a right to expect you to go along in the group goal condition"** was added to the regression as a predictor of normative conformity, along with N2 scores, it increased the prediction strength, $R^2 = .154$, $F(2, 47) = 4.267$, $p = .0198$. The survey item was a weaker predictor of MRA, compared to N2 scores ($b = 246$, $p = .0727$ versus $b = -.308$, $p = .0263$).

When the survey item **"how correct were the others"** was added to the regression as a predictor of normative conformity, along with N2 scores, it increased the prediction strength, $R^2 = .236$, $F(2, 47) = 7.271$, $p = .0018$. The survey item was a stronger predictor of MRA, compared to N2 scores ($b = .385$, $p = .0047$ versus $b = -.234$, $p = .0781$).

Summary

- Participants with lower MRA conformed more frequently than those with higher MRA.
  - In the group tests for conformity, a normative (interdependent/group goal) condition elicited more conformity behavior than a nonnormative (independent) condition.
    - No gender differences were found among conformity percentages nor MRA. No relationships between the discrepancy in conformity percentage between conditions and MRA were found.
- Participants showed a greater tendency for moral reasoning in the maintaining norms schema (stage 4).
- Participant beliefs about group members' correctness and right to expect them to conform were positively correlated with conformity behavior.
- Thus, moral development status appears to influence whether or not an individual yields to social pressure, with more sophisticated levels of moral development resulting in less conformity behavior. Further, no gender differences were observed and this effect may be observed similarly across genders.

Acknowledgements

References

Collin, C. A., Di Sano, F., & Malik, R. (1994). Effects of confederate and subject gender on conformity in a color classification task. *Social Behavior And Personality*, 22(4), 355-364.

Rest, J., Narvaez, D., Bebeau, M., & Thoma, S. (1999). Postconventional moral thinking: A neo-Kohlbergian approach. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Saltzstein, H. D., Diamond, R. M., Belenky, M. (1972). Moral judgment level and conformity behavior. *Developmental Psychology*, 7(3), 327-336.

Contact information

helenpoulsen@utexas.edu