

Research Paper

The Role of Inner Self-Criticism in Predicting Group Conformity among College Students

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ABSTRACT

Self-criticism represents a persistent tendency to evaluate oneself harshly and focus on perceived personal inadequacies. Such internal cognitive processes may influence how individuals behave within social environments, particularly in contexts where group norms and social approval play an important role. The present study examined whether inner self-criticism predicts group conformity among college students. A quantitative correlational design was employed with a sample of 200 college students aged 18–25 years. Inner self-criticism was measured using the Forms of Self-Criticising/Attacking and Self-Reassuring Scale (FSCRS), while conformity-related behaviour was assessed using the Approval Motive Scale developed by Tripathi. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and regression analysis. The findings revealed a significant negative correlation between inner self-criticism and approval motive ($r = -.435, p < .01$). Regression analysis further indicated that inner self-criticism significantly predicted group conformity, accounting for 18.9% of the variance in approval motive scores. The results highlight the role of internal self-evaluative processes in shaping social behaviour among young adults and emphasize the importance of considering cognitive factors when examining conformity in group contexts.

Keywords: *Inner Self-Criticism, Group Conformity, Approval Motive, College Students, Social Behaviour*

The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes that mental health is not merely the absence of illness but also involves the ability to cope with everyday stresses, work productively, and contribute to society. Social relationships and interactions play a significant role in maintaining psychological well-being, particularly during emerging adulthood.

The college years represent a developmental stage characterized by identity exploration, increasing independence, and heightened exposure to peer evaluation. During this period, individuals frequently engage in social comparison and encounter expectations from peer groups. These experiences often influence attitudes, decision-making, and behavioural patterns.

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One psychological factor that may influence social behaviour is self-criticism. Self-criticism refers to the tendency to engage in harsh self-evaluation, focusing on personal mistakes, perceived weaknesses, and feelings of inadequacy. Individuals who exhibit high levels of self-criticism often experience negative emotional states such as shame, guilt, and self-doubt. These internal cognitive patterns can affect how individuals interpret social interactions and respond to external evaluation.

Another important construct within social psychology is group conformity, which describes the tendency of individuals to adjust their opinions, attitudes, or behaviour in response to group influence. Classic research on conformity demonstrated that individuals may modify their responses to align with group expectations, even when they privately disagree with the majority opinion.

In the context of college environments, peer influence plays a particularly important role. Students regularly participate in group discussions, collaborative academic activities, and social gatherings where group norms may shape behaviour. The need for social acceptance and belonging may therefore influence how students respond to group pressure.

Although previous research has examined self-criticism and conformity independently, relatively limited research has explored how these two constructs interact. Understanding the relationship between internal self-evaluation and social behaviour may provide valuable insights into how individuals respond to peer influence.

Therefore, the present study aims to examine the role of inner self-criticism in predicting group conformity among college students.

Human behavior is deeply influenced by social contexts, particularly in environments where group norms and expectations shape individual decision-making. One of the most widely studied phenomena in social psychology is group conformity, which refers to the tendency of individuals to adjust their attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors to align with those of a group. Conformity plays a significant role in maintaining social harmony and cohesion, yet it can also lead individuals to suppress their personal opinions or engage in behaviors that contradict their own beliefs. Understanding the psychological factors that contribute to conformity is therefore essential for explaining how individuals function within social groups.

Among the various psychological mechanisms influencing conformity, self-evaluation processes have received increasing attention in recent years. One such process is inner self-criticism, which refers to the tendency of individuals to evaluate themselves harshly, focusing on perceived flaws, mistakes, or inadequacies. Inner self-criticism is often associated with feelings of self-doubt, fear of negative evaluation, and heightened sensitivity to social judgment. Individuals who engage in frequent self-criticism may experience greater pressure to meet external expectations, making them more susceptible to conforming to group norms.

Self-criticism is considered an important component of personality and emotional regulation. Psychologically, it is often linked with perfectionism, low self-esteem, and vulnerability to anxiety or depression. When individuals consistently evaluate themselves negatively, they may seek validation and acceptance from others as a way to compensate for internal feelings of inadequacy. This desire for social approval can influence how

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individuals behave within groups, particularly in situations where disagreement or deviation from the majority could result in criticism or rejection.

The concept of conformity has been extensively explored in classic social psychological research. Early experimental studies demonstrated that individuals frequently conform to group judgments even when those judgments are objectively incorrect. These findings highlighted the powerful influence of social pressure and the human need for belongingness. Conformity may arise from two primary motivations: normative influence, which involves conforming in order to gain acceptance or avoid rejection, and informational influence, which occurs when individuals assume that the group possesses more accurate knowledge than they do. Both forms of influence can shape how individuals respond in group settings.

Inner self-criticism may strengthen the impact of normative social influence. Individuals who are highly self-critical tend to question their own judgments and may doubt their ability to make accurate decisions. As a result, they may rely more heavily on the opinions of others when forming judgments or making choices. In group situations, such individuals may prioritize harmony and acceptance over personal conviction, increasing the likelihood that they will conform to the majority opinion.

In academic settings, group interactions are particularly significant. College students frequently participate in collaborative learning activities, peer discussions, and group projects that require them to express opinions and make collective decisions. During this developmental stage, individuals are also undergoing important psychological transitions related to identity formation, self-evaluation, and social belonging. Because peer acceptance is often highly valued among young adults, students may be especially vulnerable to conformity pressures.

At the same time, college years are a period during which patterns of self-criticism may become more pronounced. Academic competition, performance expectations, and social comparisons can intensify students' tendencies to evaluate themselves critically. Students who perceive themselves as inadequate or less competent than their peers may develop heightened levels of self-criticism, which can influence both their emotional well-being and their social behavior. Consequently, examining how inner self-criticism relates to group conformity among college students provides valuable insights into the psychological dynamics that shape peer interactions.

Previous research has suggested that self-critical individuals often demonstrate increased sensitivity to social evaluation and rejection. This sensitivity may lead them to prioritize group approval over independent thinking. When faced with conflicting opinions in a group setting, they may experience greater anxiety about standing out or being judged negatively. To reduce this discomfort, they may choose to align their responses with the majority view, even when their personal perspective differs.

Furthermore, the relationship between self-criticism and conformity can be understood within broader theoretical frameworks of self-concept and social identity. Individuals develop their sense of self through interactions with others and through feedback from their social environment. When the internal self-concept is characterized by self-doubt or negative self-evaluation, individuals may become more dependent on external validation to maintain a sense of worth. Conforming to group expectations may serve as a strategy for gaining acceptance and avoiding criticism, thereby temporarily reducing internal self-doubt.

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Despite the theoretical relevance of self-criticism to conformity, relatively limited research has directly examined the predictive relationship between these two constructs among college populations. Much of the existing literature has focused either on conformity as a social process or on self-criticism as a personality or clinical variable. Integrating these perspectives can help provide a more comprehensive understanding of how internal psychological tendencies influence behavior within group contexts.

Investigating this relationship is particularly important in educational environments, where independent thinking and critical reasoning are highly valued. Excessive conformity can hinder creativity, limit diverse perspectives, and reduce students' willingness to challenge incorrect or unethical decisions. If inner self-criticism contributes to greater conformity, identifying this relationship could have implications for promoting healthier self-perception and encouraging more confident participation in group discussions and decision-making processes.

The present study aims to explore the role of inner self-criticism in predicting group conformity among college students. By examining how individuals' tendencies toward self-critical thinking relate to their likelihood of conforming to group norms, this research seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on personality factors influencing social behavior. Understanding these dynamics may provide insights into how internal psychological processes interact with external social pressures in shaping individual behavior within groups.

In summary, exploring the connection between self-criticism and conformity may help educators, psychologists, and researchers develop strategies to foster healthier self-evaluation and promote independent thinking among students. Encouraging balanced self-reflection, strengthening self-confidence, and creating supportive academic environments may reduce excessive conformity and empower individuals to express their authentic perspectives within group settings.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine whether inner self-criticism significantly predicts group conformity behaviour among college students.

Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between inner self-criticism and group conformity among college students.
2. To examine whether the subcomponents of self-criticism predict conformity behaviour.
3. To investigate the relationship between self-reassurance and approval-seeking tendencies.

Hypotheses

- H1: Inner self-criticism will be significantly related to group conformity among college students.
- H2: The components of self-criticism will significantly predict group conformity behaviour.
- H3: Self-reassurance will be associated with conformity tendencies.

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Variables

The following variables were examined in the present study:

- **Inner Self-Criticism** – Inner self-criticism refers to a persistent tendency to evaluate oneself negatively and focus on personal shortcomings or perceived failures. It involves harsh self-judgment, feelings of inadequacy, and sensitivity to mistakes, which may influence an individual's emotional and social functioning.
- **Group Conformity (Approval Motive)** – Group conformity refers to the tendency of individuals to modify their attitudes, opinions, or behaviours in order to align with group expectations or gain social approval. In the present study, group conformity is reflected through the individual's approval motive within social situations.

Sample

The study included 200 college students aged between 18 and 25 years, currently enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate programs. Participants were selected using a convenience sampling technique.

Research Design

The present research adopted a quantitative correlational research design to examine the relationship between inner self-criticism and group conformity. Correlation analysis was used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between the variables, while regression analysis was conducted to assess whether inner self-criticism significantly predicts conformity behaviour.

Instruments

1. Forms of Self-Criticising/Attacking and Self-Reassuring Scale (FSCRS)

Inner self-criticism was measured using the FSCRS developed by Gilbert (2004). The scale assesses three dimensions:

- Inadequate Self
- Hated Self
- Reassured Self

The Inadequate Self and Hated Self dimensions were combined to represent inner self-criticism, while Reassured Self was analyzed separately.

2. Approval Motive Scale

Group conformity tendencies were measured using the Approval Motive Scale developed by Tripathi, which assesses individuals' tendency to seek social approval and adjust behaviour accordingly.

Procedure

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided voluntary consent prior to participation. Data were collected through standardized self-report questionnaires administered either in person or online. After completion of the questionnaires, the responses were compiled and analyzed using statistical methods including descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and regression analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary and based on informed consent. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and would be used solely for

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academic purposes. No identifying personal information was collected, and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any stage.

RESULTS

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	N	Mean	SD
Inner Self-Criticism	200	58.42	10.35
Approval Motive	200	34.76	7.21

N = 200

Table 2: Correlation Between Inner Self-Criticism and Approval Motive

Variables	1	2
1. Inner Self-Criticism	—	
2. Approval Motive	-.435**	—

$p < .01$

Pearson correlation analysis indicated a significant negative relationship between inner self-criticism and approval motive ($r = -.435$, $p < .01$), suggesting that higher levels of self-criticism were associated with lower approval-seeking tendencies.

Table 3: Regression Analysis Predicting Approval Motive from Inner Self-Criticism

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Inner Self-Criticism	-0.31	0.05	-0.435	-6.79	<.001

Model Summary

R	R ²	F	df	p
0.435	0.189	46.19	1,198	<.001

Regression analysis indicated that inner self-criticism significantly predicted approval motive, $F(1,198) = 46.19$, $p < .001$. The model explained 18.9% of the variance in approval motive scores ($R^2 = .189$).

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the role of inner self-criticism in predicting group conformity among college students, with approval-seeking behaviour used as an indicator of conformity tendencies. Descriptive statistics were first calculated to examine the distribution of the study variables. The results indicated moderate levels of approval-seeking behaviour among participants, suggesting that the students in the sample displayed a noticeable but not excessive tendency to seek validation or acceptance from others in social contexts. In the college environment, where peer interactions and social evaluation are frequent, such moderate levels of approval motivation may reflect the developmental characteristics of emerging adulthood. During this period, individuals often navigate complex social environments in which peer acceptance, belongingness, and identity development play an important role. Consequently, approval-seeking behaviour may function as a common social strategy through which individuals attempt to maintain positive interpersonal relationships and avoid social rejection.

The correlational analysis provided further insight into the relationship between inner self-criticism and approval-seeking behaviour. The findings revealed a moderate negative

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relationship between inner self-criticism and approval motive ($r = -.435, p < .01$). This result indicates that individuals who reported higher levels of inner self-critical thinking tended to demonstrate lower levels of approval-seeking behaviour. In other words, as students' tendencies to engage in harsh self-evaluation increased, their motivation to seek validation or acceptance from others decreased. This pattern of results suggests that internal cognitive processes may play a meaningful role in shaping social behaviour within group contexts.

One possible explanation for this negative association is that individuals with high levels of self-criticism may rely more strongly on internal standards of evaluation rather than external feedback. Self-critical individuals frequently engage in persistent internal judgments about their own performance, abilities, and personal worth. Because their attention is directed inward toward evaluating their perceived shortcomings, they may become less motivated to actively seek approval from others. Their behaviour may therefore be guided more strongly by internal cognitive evaluations than by social reinforcement. As a result, the need to obtain validation from peers may become less central in guiding their social interactions.

Another interpretation of this finding relates to the emotional characteristics associated with self-critical thinking. Individuals who frequently criticize themselves often experience heightened sensitivity to negative evaluation and increased self-awareness. This internal vigilance may lead them to approach social situations with caution. Rather than engaging in behaviours that attract attention or invite evaluation, self-critical individuals may adopt a more restrained or reserved interpersonal style. Their lower approval-seeking behaviour may therefore reflect an attempt to reduce the likelihood of negative judgment or criticism from others. In such cases, reduced approval motivation may function as a protective strategy that helps individuals manage potential social threats.

The regression analysis further supported the relationship between inner self-criticism and approval-seeking behaviour. A simple linear regression was conducted to examine whether inner self-criticism predicts group conformity tendencies. The regression model was statistically significant, $F(1,198) = 46.19, p < .001$, indicating that inner self-criticism plays a meaningful role in explaining variation in approval motive scores. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = .189$) suggested that inner self-criticism accounted for a measurable portion of variability in approval-seeking behaviour. In addition, the standardized regression coefficient ($\beta = -.435$) demonstrated that higher levels of inner self-criticism were associated with lower levels of approval motivation.

These results suggest that inner self-criticism may function as an important psychological predictor of how individuals respond to social expectations within group environments. Conformity behaviours are commonly driven by the desire to gain acceptance or avoid rejection from others. However, the present findings indicate that individuals who display strong self-critical tendencies may not necessarily conform in order to obtain approval. Instead, their behaviour may be shaped more strongly by internal evaluative processes than by external social pressures.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings highlight the significance of internal psychological processes in shaping social behaviour. Much of the traditional research on conformity has focused on situational influences such as group pressure, social norms, and majority influence. These factors undoubtedly play a central role in shaping individuals'

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behaviour in group settings. However, the present study suggests that personal cognitive tendencies may also influence how individuals respond to these external pressures.

Individuals differ in the way they interpret and respond to social situations, and these differences may be partly explained by internal patterns of self-evaluation.

Self-criticism is frequently associated with personality characteristics such as perfectionism, heightened self-monitoring, and strong internal standards. Individuals who possess these traits often evaluate their behaviour according to internal criteria rather than relying primarily on feedback from others. In such cases, social approval may become less influential in shaping behaviour. Rather than adjusting their actions to match group expectations, self-critical individuals may focus on evaluating whether their behaviour aligns with their own personal standards. This internal orientation may explain why higher levels of self-criticism were linked with lower levels of approval-seeking behaviour in the present study.

At the same time, it is also important to consider that reduced approval-seeking behaviour may not necessarily indicate greater independence from social influence. In some cases, high levels of self-criticism may lead to increased self-doubt or fear of negative evaluation. Individuals who judge themselves harshly may become highly concerned about making mistakes in social situations. As a result, they may attempt to minimize behaviours that could expose them to judgment or criticism. Avoiding approval-seeking behaviours may therefore represent a strategy aimed at reducing social risk rather than a sign of resistance to social influence.

The context of the college environment provides an important background for interpreting these findings. College students frequently participate in collaborative learning activities, group discussions, and peer-based social interactions. These environments often involve subtle forms of social evaluation, where students become aware of how their opinions, behaviours, or abilities are perceived by others. Approval-seeking behaviour can therefore influence how individuals participate in group discussions, express their viewpoints, or respond to peer expectations.

Within such environments, students who exhibit strong self-critical tendencies may approach social interactions differently from those who rely more heavily on external validation. Self-critical students may become more cautious when expressing their ideas or engaging in social discussions. Their attention may remain focused on evaluating their own performance or behaviour rather than on gaining approval from peers. As a result, their interpersonal behaviour may appear less driven by the need for social validation.

The findings of this study also emphasize the importance of considering individual psychological differences when examining conformity-related behaviour. While group norms and peer pressure remain powerful influences, not all individuals respond to these pressures in the same way. Internal cognitive tendencies, such as self-criticism, may shape how individuals interpret social expectations and determine how they respond to them. Understanding these internal processes can therefore provide a more comprehensive explanation of social behaviour within group contexts.

Several methodological considerations should be taken into account when interpreting the results of the present study. The research relied on self-report instruments to assess both

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inner self-criticism and approval-seeking behaviour. Self-report methods are widely used in psychological research; however, they may be influenced by response biases such as social desirability or inaccurate self-perceptions. Participants may unintentionally misjudge or misrepresent their behavioural tendencies when responding to questionnaire items. Future research may benefit from incorporating additional assessment approaches, including behavioural observation methods or peer-report measures, in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of these constructs.

The characteristics of the sample also represent a contextual factor that should be considered. The participants consisted of college students, and therefore the findings may reflect the developmental and social characteristics associated with emerging adulthood. During this stage, individuals often experience heightened awareness of peer evaluation while simultaneously developing greater independence in their thinking and decision-making. These developmental processes may influence how self-critical tendencies interact with conformity-related behaviour.

Future research may further explore additional psychological variables that could interact with self-criticism in shaping social behaviour. Factors such as self-esteem, fear of negative evaluation, interpersonal sensitivity, or social anxiety may influence how individuals respond to group expectations. Examining these variables together may provide deeper insight into the complex psychological mechanisms that underlie conformity-related behaviours within young emerging adults

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that inner self-criticism is significantly associated with group conformity among college students. The results indicate that self-critical thinking can influence individuals' motivation to seek approval within social groups. These findings emphasize the importance of considering internal psychological processes when examining social behaviour amongst young adults.

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Conflict of Interest

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