

Abstract

Do agents imitate others even where there is no economic advantage from doing so? Do they rely on information about what peers are doing? Do they comply to peer advice or to a request by an authority? Is rule following itself a motivation? We develop a stylized experimental paradigm to understand whether, in the simplest of possible settings that minimizes any likelihood of informational or other rational mechanisms, agents react to peer behavior information and requests from an authority (or from peers). We do this employing a sequence of online experiments with representative samples of the US population and with pre-registered experimental designs. The basic setup of our online experiments involves a one-shot choice between two options implying the same or different payoffs, with control questions to check for understanding, attention to the task and reasons for the participants' choices. Our key findings are that, even when it is costly, around 60% of participants comply to a request by an authority. There is no evidence for rule following beyond this. We find no evidence for imitation or for any effect of peer behavior information; and, if it is a peer making a request, this is also ineffective. The results are not aligned with what experts or our generative AI simulations predict. Future research can modify our stylized experimental paradigm to determine what drives real world conformism.