

# Exploring Gender Conformity in a South African Tertiary Institution: A Field Experiment

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## Abstract

This field experiment aimed to answer the following research question: *Is there a significant association between gender and conformity in a South African context?* The methodological foundations for our research question (within a South African context) were laid by the United States of America field experiment of Carter et al. (2019) and accordingly unobtrusive observation was used to observe male and female conformity. The setting for the field experiment was a cafeteria on campus at a tertiary institution in South Africa. Statistical data analysis revealed a significant association between gender and conformity, with males less conforming and more non-conforming than expected, and females more conforming and less non-conforming than expected. Moreover, a content analysis of observed verbal behavior revealed the following five categories: females expressed anger, females critically questioned gender signs, males expressed amusement at the experience, males casually inquired about gender signs, and finally that groups influence vocal expression. In contrast to international studies, our results show high rates of non-conformity and amusement amongst males and high rates of conformity and anger amongst females.

## Keywords

Conformity, Gender Norms, Observation, Psychology, Field Experiment, South Africa

## 1. Introduction

Schroeder and Liben (2021) noted that individuals are exposed to messages from their families, peers, communities, and the media that perpetuate traditional gender roles. Consequently, expectations about how males and females should

behave or express gender are generally structured by facets such as cultures or societies (Mantell et al., 2009) parents' attitudes (Jackson et al., 2021; Lan & Isacoff, 2022) or even the self and other peers (Jackson et al., 2021). Although these roles are dynamic in how they are expressed over time, males and females still accept these present relations as natural and fixed and continuously refer to the economic, social and cultural roles, behaviors and attributes that are associated with being male or female (Zhu & Chang, 2019). For the purpose of this current field experiment male and female identification was based on physiological characteristics evaluated by the observers (see Lindqvist et al., 2021). The researchers acknowledge that an individual's gender identification cannot be exclusively tied to sexual dimorphism as binary gender systems do not accurately reflect subjective lived experiences for individuals. However, in South Africa, like in other countries, gender discrimination and inequality break down along the lines of a binary gender system where women and men often need to conform to gender norms relating to uneven gender-specific experiences (Casale & Posel, 2021).

### 1.1. Gender Norms

Gender norms and expectations begin in the earliest stages of an individual's life and are crucial in shaping a person's attitudes, opportunities, experiences, and behaviors (Weber et al., 2019). Jackson et al. (2021) capture this as gender typicality, thus, how individuals understand their interests, personality, and behaviors that should align with stereotypical characteristics attributed to other males and females. Therefore, gender norms can be regarded as the spoken and unspoken societal rules imposed on individuals (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018; Weber et al., 2019). These rules dictate the accepted and expected societal behaviors of the individual according to their biological sex (Weber et al., 2019). Pearse and Connell (2016) describe this as not just the attitudes in individuals' minds but embedded within the broader structures, systems, and institutions of society.

Within contemporary societies, Pearse and Connell (2016) argue that norms that act as hindrances to gender equality are not the only gender norms to consider, but the inverse also exists. The symbolic dimension in which we define gender norms is a significant element in the existence of a gendered social life, that can be found in all forms of social practices within all institutions (Pearse & Connell, 2016).

### 1.2. Problem Statement

Carter et al. (2019) conducted an experiment (consisting of two studies) in the United States of America to examine the influences of gender norms on gender-role conformity. Through conducting an unobtrusive observation, the researchers observed and recorded the conformity rates of males and females, after placing gender signs on doors at the entrance of a building. The observations found in their study that males tend to conform more to the gender role signs

than females (Carter et al., 2019).

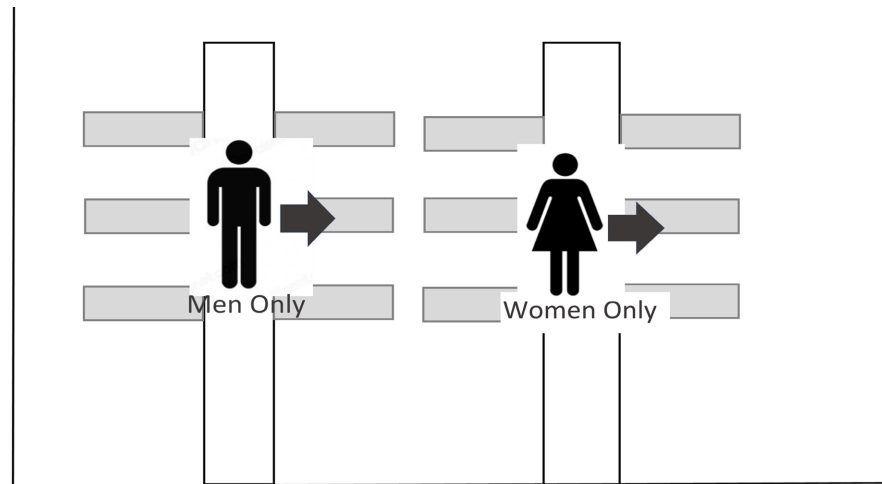
Carter et al. (2019) recommended that future research should be conducted in a more diverse population. As far as the researchers' knowledge, a similar field experiment to that of Carter et al. (2019) has not been conducted in South Africa. Therefore, the purpose of this (our) field experiment was to conceptually investigate the influences of gender norms on gender-role conformity in South Africa. The study of Carter et al. (2019) laid the methodological foundation from which our research question was drawn and from which observations were conducted. From the above-mentioned experiment, we posed the following research question: *Is there a significant association between gender and conformity in a South African context?*

## 2. Method

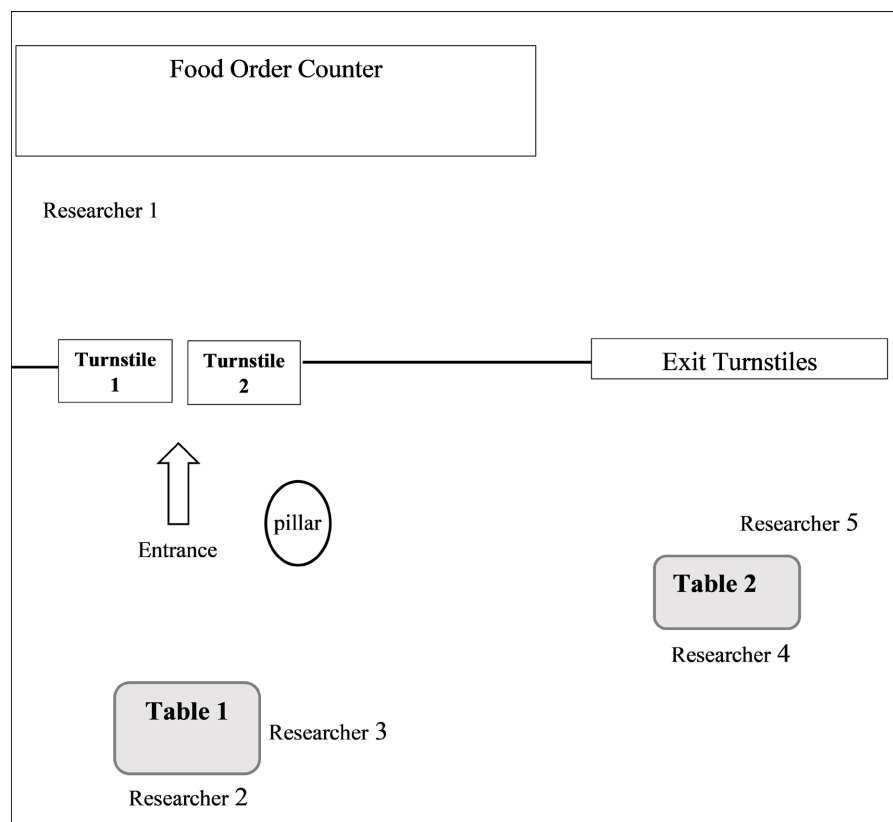
### 2.1. Observation Methodology and Setting

This field experiment utilized unobtrusive observation to record the gender conformity rates of males and females within the observation setting. In this field experiment (Kassin et al., 2014), researchers assumed the “complete observer” role which enabled the researchers (observers) to go unnoticed and unseen (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). The setting for the observation was a cafeteria on campus at a tertiary institution in South Africa. The population of the tertiary institution includes undergraduate and postgraduate students ( $N = 53,071$ ). The population gender includes 59% females and 41% males with diverse racial backgrounds: Black African (68.8%), White (26.4%), Coloured (3.57%), Asian (1.0%) and other (0.09%). The cafeteria was identified as the ideal setting as it had two turnstile entrances, it had the potential to produce a large number of individuals to observe, and the researchers were more likely to go unnoticed. Two custom signs with a size of 210 mm  $\times$  297 mm each were displayed at a height of 140 mm on the separate turnstiles. The first sign was a male-only sign with a male symbol, an arrow to the right, and the words “male only” written underneath. The second sign was a female-only sign with a female symbol, an arrow to the right, and the words “female only” written underneath. See Figure 1 for sign placement.

Unstructured observations with the researchers as a complete observer were conducted for 60 minutes. Before the commencement of the field experiment, it was noticed that a pillar near the turnstiles had the potential to obstruct the long-range view of the sign on the right turnstile. Therefore, the “male only” and “female only” signs were switched after 30 minutes. During the first 10 minutes of the observation one observer (researcher 1) took notes of comments individuals made as they entered the turnstiles, two observers (researchers 2 and 3) observed male conformity, and two observers (researchers 4 and 5) observed female conformity. See Figure 2 for the field experiment layout for the initial 10 minutes.

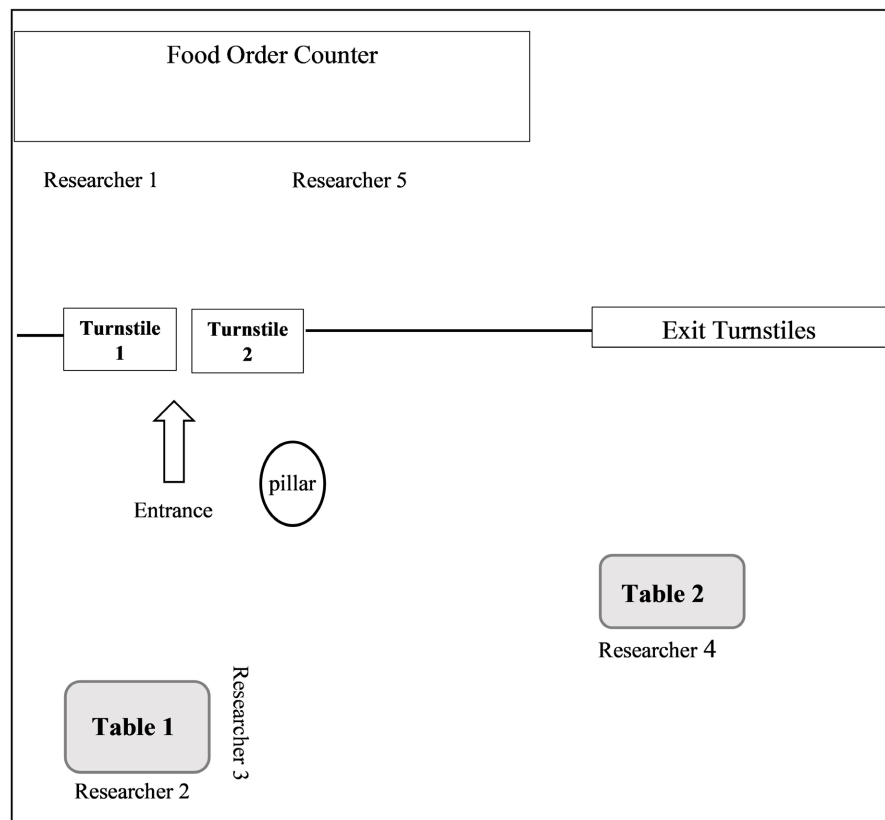


**Figure 1.** Turnstile sign placement (after 30 minutes the male and female signs were switched around).



**Figure 2.** Cafeteria entrance layout and planned observer (researcher) placement.

After 10 minutes the observer (researcher 1) at the food order counter requested that a second observer (researcher 5) join them as they were not able to understand all the comments being made due to language barriers. Thereafter, two observers (researchers 1 and 5) noted the comments of individuals as they passed through the turnstiles and three observers (researchers 2, 3 and 4) observed male and female conformity and non-conformity. See **Figure 3** for the



**Figure 3.** Changes made to observer (researcher) placement after 10 minutes.

changes in researcher (observer) positions.

## 2.2. Methodological Rigor

The field notes (anecdotal records) taken during the field experiment included comments made by individuals in the area, the context of the field experiment, deviations from the planned methodology, experiences of the observers (researchers), and conforming and non-conforming males and females. The data gathered in the field notes were used to inform the meaning of observed participants' verbal behavior reactions (Maharaj, 2016). Moreover, the field notes served as a critical reflection tool as the observers (researchers) discussed their experiences, thoughts, and impressions with two senior researchers immediately upon completion of the field experiment (Johnson et al., 2020; Maharaj, 2016). Inter-coder testing was applied during the content analysis to increase the transparency of the coding process of observed verbal behavior made by participants and to reduce the possibility of researcher (observer) bias (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Confirmability and transparency of the field experiment are ensured by providing a rich description of the methodology and context (Schurink et al., 2021). This detailed description can provide future researchers with the necessary information to decide if the results are relevant to their purposes (Schurink et al., 2021).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Statistical Analysis

**Table 1** and **Figure 4** depict the results of the observational study field experiment, which included ( $N = 167$ ) individuals. Of the observed individuals, 92 (55.1%) were male and 75 (44.9%) were female.

The majority of individuals (62.8%) conformed to the gender signs and the data indicated that more females (72%) conformed than males (55.4%).

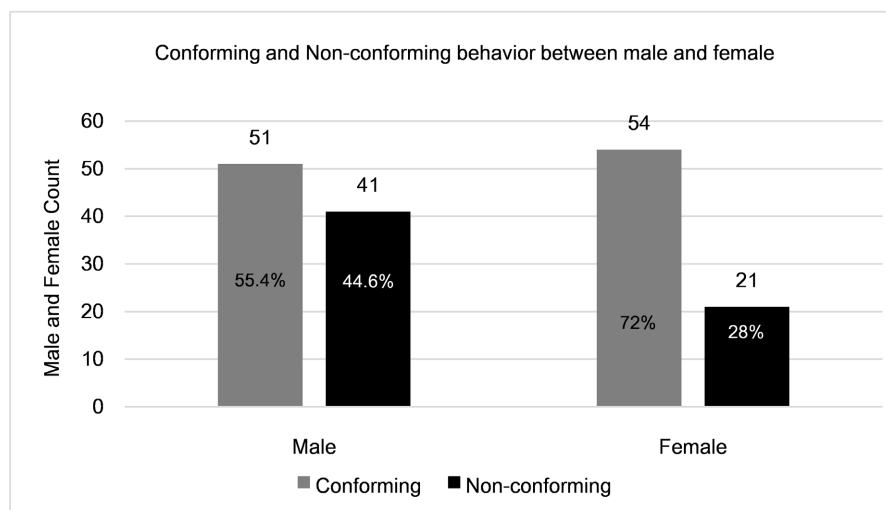
A chi-square test ( $\chi^2$ ) indicated that there exists a significant association between gender and conformity, [ $\chi^2 (1, N = 167) = 4.71, p = 0.041$ ]. According to the observed and expected values, males were less conforming and more non-conforming than expected, in contrast, females were more conforming and less non-conforming than expected.

#### 3.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

Content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of the observed verbal behavior yielded five core categories; two for females, two for males, and one for groups

**Table 1.** Conforming and non-conforming males and females.

Gender		Conforming		Non-Conforming		Total
		N	%	N	%	N
Male	Count	51	55.4	41	44.6	92
	Expected Count	57.8		34.2		
Female	Count	54	72	21	28	75
	Expected Count	47.2		27.8		
Total		105 (62.87%)		62 (37.13%)		167



**Figure 4.** Conformity and non-conformity graph.

(see **Table 2**). Evidence is presented for each category (with frequencies) and relevant discussion thereof.

### **Category 1: Females Expressed Anger**

Females expressed anger after entering turnstiles. Observed verbal behavior was as follows: “*This f% is sexist*”; “*Sexist, not inclusive*”; and “*F% norms*”. According to the literature, conforming to restrictive gender norms has a greater negative impact on female mental health than on males (Sanchez et al., 2005). Should females have perceived the signs as discriminatory, they may consequently have expressed anger towards them. Additionally, because females have previously been disadvantaged, they are more sensitive to gender discrimination than males (Drury & Kalser, 2014; Khan et al., 2018).

### **Category 2: Females Critically Questioned Gender Signs**

Females critically questioned why gender signs were required in the social setting. Observed verbal behavior was as follows: “*What the hell?*”; “*Why is this thing discriminating?*”; and “*What if someone doesn't identify with a gender?*”. Literature indicates that females are more sensitive to sexism than males are (Drury & Kalser, 2014; Khan et al., 2018), therefore if they perceived the signs as sexist, they may have consequently questioned them.

### **Category 3: Males Expressed Amusement at the Experience**

Males expressed amusement, laughing, and intentionally not conforming to gender signs. Observed verbal behavior was as follows: “*I don't know [male participant laughing]*”; “*Two males entering the female-gendered turnstile and laughing*”; and “*Five male participants laughing as they entered the turnstiles*”. Previous research indicates that males may use humor that trivializes females as a way to improve in-group cohesion (Meghana & Vijaya, 2020; Thomae & Pine, 2015). Males in groups may have expressed amusement and non-conformity to improve the social cohesion of their group.

### **Category 4: Males Casually Inquired about Gender Signs**

Males questioned the gender signs in a light-hearted manner; their questions were not as critical as those of females. Observed verbal behavior was as follows: “*I wonder who put this up?*” and “*What is happening here [male participant laughing]?*” Males, according to Drury and Kalser (2014), are less likely than females to identify sexism and thus less likely to take a sexist situation seriously. As a result, males may not have expressed strong opinions about sexism or discrimination such as those of females if they did not recognize the situation in

**Table 2.** Categories of the experiences of individuals after entering turnstiles.

	Category	Frequencies
1	Females expressed anger	5
2	Females critically questioned gender signs	6
3	Males expressed amusement at the experience	8
4	Males casually inquired about gender signs	2
5	Groups influence vocal expression	2

that way.

#### Category 5: Groups Influence Vocal Expression

In groups of the same gender, individuals were more vocally expressive about the signs. In groups of mixed gender, individuals were less vocally expressive. Observed verbal behavior was as follows: “*Female entered with a male, made no comment*” and “*Group of males entered and loudly laughed*”. Research suggests males may perceive females negatively when females confront gender signs (Anisman-Razin et al., 2018), consequently females may not have made critical comments when with a male. Additionally, individuals had similar expressions in groups of the same gender, possibly due to the effect of group opinion on individual behavior (Klucharev et al., 2009).

### 4. Discussion

This field experiment aimed to investigate if there is a significant association between gender and conformity within a South African context. Although studies in the United States of America explored the effects of gender norms on gender role conformity, no such study (to our knowledge) has been conducted with a diverse population such as that of South Africa. Our field experiment provided data on the number of conforming and non-conforming males and females, as well as qualitative data (observed verbal behavior) from field notes (anecdotal records). The qualitative data provided categories to complement the statistical data gathered.

One of the key results, that more individuals conformed, is consistent with Carter et al.’s (2019) study of gender conformity. According to Carter et al. (2019), individuals are more likely to conform to the norms set out by their in-group to avoid rejection, ridicule, or harsh criticism.

In contrast to Carter et al.’s (2019) study, higher rates of non-conformity were observed among males in our field experiment. There has been little research to help explain this result, however, the qualitative data of our field experiment may provide insight. Content analysis revealed that males expressed amusement at the experience. Male students’ humor and intentional disobedience may contribute to group social approval and improved group cohesion (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Meghana & Vijaya, 2020; Thomae & Pine, 2015). If male students in this setting entered the turnstiles in groups more frequently, the influence of such groups may have contributed to the high rates of non-conformity observed.

An additional result was that when we only looked at the results of females, they conformed to the gender signs on the turnstiles more than males. This supports the results of Della Vigna et al.’s (2012) study which showed that females are more likely to conform in public settings. Interestingly, in our field experiment females expressed anger while conforming to the gender signs. This contradicts research which indicates that in general men are more likely to express verbal anger (Fischer & Evers, 2011). Furthermore, when individuals are



unsure about the correctness of their decisions, they are more likely to conform (Drače & Efendić, 2020). If females were unsure whether non-conformity was acceptable, they may have continued to conform despite expressing anger.

Finally, we found that groups of the same or opposite gender influenced individuals' vocal expressiveness. Individuals, male and female, expressed similar opinions when grouped with others of the same gender. Groups of females, in particular, loudly expressed anger and dissatisfaction with the gender signs, whereas when paired with a male or in a group with males, they did not appear to express the same anger. Females may have reserved such opinions around males to avoid potential negative perceptions (Anisman-Razin et al., 2018).

In contrast to international studies, our results show high rates of non-conformity and amusement amongst males and high rates of conformity and anger amongst females. Within the South African context, it is believed that all racial and ethnic groups have long-standing gender roles, which are based on the fundamentals that women are less important or deserving of power (Mudau & Obadire, 2017). This consequently adds to the notion that most African traditional social systems are centered and dominated by males. Additionally, individual expressiveness appears to be determined by group influence, which may also have influenced whether or not individuals conformed to the gender signs.

## 5. Limitations and Recommendations

This field experiment was not without limitations. Language barriers experienced during the first 10 minutes of the observation could have resulted in relevant data not being recorded. Observational data will not always be objective as the researcher as a research instrument is subjective which can influence the information observed and analyzed (Strydom, 2021). Furthermore, not all individuals entering the cafeteria may have noted the signs once they were placed. The results of this field experiment therefore cannot be generalized to other populations and should be interpreted with caution. Furthermore, the display of male and female-only signs may have negatively impacted individuals as well as the observed results, as not all individuals relate to the assigned gender operational definition within this field experiment (see Lindqvist et al., 2021).

It is recommended that future research should include a larger sample size in multiple contexts within South Africa. Furthermore, as culture is argued to play a role in the meaning of conformity and non-conformity (Hiller & Baudin, 2016), future research may explore South African individuals' ethnic influences on gender conformity.

## 6. Ethical Considerations

Per the South Africa Department of Health (2015), ethical clearance for observing people in public spaces need not go through formal ethic clearance. The researchers did not interact directly with individuals, no direct intervention was staged, and individuals or groups' privacy and identity were not impeded. Per-

mission to conduct the field experiment was obtained from the tertiary institutional cafeteria staff.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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