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# The positive conformity experiment: judgments and decisions in cohesive groups under the pressure of positive attitudes

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**Abstract:** In classical conformity experiments, the conformity has been defined as a negative phenomenon or as a distortion of judgment under the group pressure. Furthermore, experiments are mainly performed within social aggregates rather than on groups, and even less on cohesive ones. This study aims to reshape positively the conformity while happening within cohesive groups. It shows how the positive social pressure of cohesive group members, intended as an influence based on optimism, can cause to the less optimistic group member a positive conformity. The present research relies on a quasi-experimental design in a cross-cultural setting. It considers the positive influence within groups of family members belonging to family businesses that are cohesive in terms of values. Both ‘positive conformity’ as a concept and ‘positive conformity experiment’ as a procedure are originated in this study. Findings show that out of 129 naïve, 54 conformed totally, 46 partially, and 29 resisted.

**Keywords:** positive conformity; positive conformity experiment; PCE; picture apperception value test; PAVT; optimism; cohesiveness; family business.

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## **1 Introduction**

Since the creation of the conformity concept (Allport, 1920a, 1920b, 1924; Jenness, 1932), its connotation has been negative and continues to be so in most cases. Although some authors consider labelling conformity as 'good' or 'bad' an absurd question (Aronson, 2008), the concept is generally associated with a lack of independence on the part of an individual or as a distortion of judgment under group pressure (Asch, 1951; 1952; 1955; 1956). In simplest terms, conformity has been defined as 'yielding to group pressures' (Crutchfield, 1955, 1962; Mann, 1969), and thus something that one should resist. Despite this fact, there are some authors who define conformity in accordance with

normative social influence, or the “influence to conform with the positive expectations of another...person, group, or one’s self” [Deutsch and Gerard, (1955), p.629]. Perhaps, the most significant works in this sense are those of Cialdini et al. (1991), and Kallgren et al. (2000). They have developed a model of normative conduct in order to influence people to conform to correct and socially approved behaviour, meaning those behaviours based on social norms (i.e., the rules that a society has for acceptable behaviours, values, and beliefs). Furthermore, researchers have made advances showing a positive correlation between conformity to group norms and team cohesiveness [Carron, 1982; Kinoshita, 1964; Lott and Lott, 1961; Myers, (2010), p.213; Schermerhorn et al., (2010), pp.188–189]. These advances are important because cohesiveness itself is positively related to performance [Beal et al., 2003; Carron and Brawley, 2012; Forsyth, (2010), p.138; Gully et al., 1995; Mullen and Copper, 1994; Oliver, 1988; Park and Shin, 2009] and satisfaction [Hackman, 1992; Hare, 1976; Hellriegel and Slocum, (2011), p.373; Hogg, 1992; Hoyle and Crawford, 1994; Van der Vegt et al., 2001; Van Zelst, 1952; Williams, (2007), pp.51–54]. It means that conformity, given the appropriate contingency factors, can serve as a positive component. Notwithstanding these positive associations, researchers are ambivalent about labelling conformity as ‘positive conformity’, or as a positive decisional action within group dynamics (at least in necessary situations), even though this is strongly dependent on context and scope.

Another limit related to most conformity experiments is their use of individuals unknown to each other (Jenness, 1932; Sherif, 1935; Asch, 1955; Crutchfield, 1955). Hence, rather than experimenting conformity within organisations where individuals know each other (e.g., families), experiments are ‘suddenly’ performed on extemporaneous aggregations of individuals without any significant tie. In other words, experiments are conducted more on citizens than on human resources. This is a derivate of the predominance that conformity studies about the society have had at the expense of specific conformity studies on businesses and other organisations. It is comprehensible because conformity is a matter born in the field of social psychology, and the application of the concept in organisational studies remains a value proposition or an extension, emphasised still less in family business studies (Miller et al., 2012). As a result, conformity looks like a ‘conditioned reflex’ of social influence, understood to mean the influence coming from the society or a portion of it (e.g., a specific aggregation extracted from a crowd) with the power to change our attitudes, behaviours, values, and beliefs (Bond and Smith, 1996; Cialdini and Trost, 1998; Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). However, conformity experiments developed from noted exponents on the topic have also been realised within organisations to study, for example, conformity to group norms (Kelley and Shapiro, 1954); conformity to group attractiveness (Rotter, 1967); or simply conformity caused by normative social influence upon individual judgments, while individuals were not unrelated parts of an aggregation but interrelated compositional parts of a group (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). Nevertheless, if some tangential studies have been performed on positive social influence or on organisational groups, none of them have considered positive conformity itself, based on optimism’s influence to be performed on consonant groups and, especially, on cohesive groups of family businesses. The latter perspective is also the aim of this research, given the research gap in previous studies and experiments. Thus, the purpose of this research is to find out if there is any positive social pressure of cohesive group members within family businesses, intended as an influence based on optimism, which can cause to the less optimistic group member a

positive conformity, intended as a conformity toward other members' positive attitudes such as optimism.

The structure of this work it is conceptualised to follow with the systematic review of literature (Section 2), considering first the original conformity studies and experiments. Because it was aimed to study the conformity within small family businesses and supposedly cohesive groups, then it was deemed necessary to review the concepts of cohesion and conformity in family business studies. Afterwards, since the authors emphasise the positive side of conformity, the emergence of positive conformity studies has been analysed through an interdisciplinary perspective. After the literature review, the article's structure continues with the methodology, unfolding methods, techniques and instruments of data gathering as deeply analysed in Section 3. Section 4 deals with the analysis of the collected data. Section 5 refers to the discussion of findings by concluding with implications and limitations of this study.

## 2 Literature

### *2.1 Conformity: a review of classical studies and experiments*

Conformity is a phenomenon we run into in everyday life in every type of organisation. Many studies and experiments have been done on this subject. One of the first scholars concerned with the phenomenon of conformity, from an experimental standpoint, was Arthur Jenness, who was influenced by the works of social psychologist, Allport (1920a, 1920b, 1924). In Jenness (1932) defined conformity (though he did not make use of the term) as an alteration of an individual's opinion when others differ materially in their opinions about a question. For Jenness, "This may be interpreted as an indication of the influence of social pressure in contributing to understatement, rather than overstatement of opinion, even after the individuals who constituted the social situation are no longer present" (p.294).

Some years later, Sherif (1935, 1936) made public the results of his experiments about conformity. He based his experiments on a visual illusion called the autokinetic effect. The autokinetic effect was used to create an ambiguous situation for each individual participant due to an unstable reference point for where the position of the light was anchored. Thus, when participants were gathered, they heard from each other different viewpoints regarding the light's movement, and consequently they conformed to a common estimate by the group. It means that personal insecurity can be compensated for with the group's security, using group members as a source of information, and believing that the group's opinion is the correct one. This is a process of informational social influence or social proof (Cialdini, 2009), or "the influence of other people that leads us to conform because we see them as a source of information to guide our behavior; we conform because we believe that others' interpretation of an ambiguous situation is more correct than ours and will help us choose an appropriate course of action" [Aronson et al., (2010), p.215]. Therefore, in the face of uncertain conditions, group members use the responses of others in the group as reference points and informative resources, being thus influenced by an informational power (Raven, 1965). Informational social influence, rather than simple public compliance, involves private acceptance (which follows, or fails to follow, the compliance) based on a genuine belief that the influencer's behaviour (what he/she is saying or doing) is right and should be

followed. When the influencer has a referent power (Raven, 1992), so that the influenced individual is attracted or identified with him, then the component of social influence that comes out is that of identification. In this case, the influenced mind thinks: "I want to be like the influencer." A step forward is internalisation, where values, beliefs or behaviours of the influencer are not simply 'things' to be followed by the influenced individual in specific moments; they are components of a 'permanent cause' deeply rooted in the individual's system of beliefs. Therefore, the individual makes both a public compliance and a private acceptance. These components of social influence (i.e., compliance, identification and internalisation), which were ideated by the Harvard psychologist, Kelman (1958), are basic factors of conformity.

If Sherif's experiments were essentially based on informational conformity, Asch's experiments relied on normative conformity (i.e., public compliance). Unlike Sherif's situation, which was ambiguous, Asch (1951, 1955) conducted a 'stimulus line experiment', based on a visual/perceptual judgment in a totally clear situation. Participants' duty was simple: it was sufficient to compare the standard line with the others, and to tell which one of the comparison lines corresponded to the standard line. All the participants, except one (the 'cavy' or the naïve), were instructed to give the wrong answer. With this experiment Asch wanted to test how social pressure influences the judgment of an individual in a certain situation from the informational standpoint. The average conformity rate across Asch's experiment was 33%. A similar average (30%) was reached also by Crutchfield (1955) in an experiment conceptually like that of Asch. These are significant rates if we consider that that social behaviour is not an exact science. But the main question that arises is: why do individuals conform to the group norms?

In case of informational social influence, people conform because they have the need to be informed about the right direction to follow in the face of a highly uncertain situation. On the other hand, normative social influence creates pressure for single individuals for social approval in situations that have a greater amount of certainty. Therefore, individuals feel the need to be accepted by the group; they experience a social need, the belonging and affection need (Maslow, 1954). Nobody wants to be excluded; it has an emotional cost. This fact is also supported by neurobiological evidence. Berns et al. (2005) used functional magnetic resonance imaging and a task of mental rotation in the context of peer pressure to investigate the neural basis of individualistic and conforming behaviour in the face of wrong information. In accordance with the brain regions that were involved, perceptual and emotional processes were active during the act of social conformity. In substance, individuals conform because their amygdale produces a feeling codified as a 'fear of separation' caused by the coercive effect of group pressures on individuals' behaviour (Harvey, 1988). In other words, it seems clear that the group, as a social entity, exercises a coercive power ('I will punish you in case of disagreement') and a reward power ('I will give you rewards for compliance') toward single members.

## *2.2 Cohesion and conformity in family business studies: what's missing?*

The family is by nature the most cohesive unit of a society. Its influence is relevant not only inside but also when family members deal with various outside contexts. Also, in

family business studies conducted from different perspectives, the family cohesion of group members has attracted the attention of scholars.

While some researchers propose that the combination of family and business creates a need for trade-offs in family and business demands, there are others who argue that the social system of the family creates a synergy in the top management team that is not present in those teams with less ‘familiness’ (Ensley and Pearson, 2005). According to the authors, the social family dynamics of the family-owned firm will result in higher cohesion, potency, task conflict and shared strategic consensus than those with less ‘familiness’. The significance of running a family business is also supported by other researchers who measure group cohesiveness in comparison between family and non-family firms, concluding that family firms have higher levels of profitability, survival and cohesion, and that the levels of trust, participation and organisational climate have a positive and significant influence on the performance of family firms (Jiménez et al., 2015).

In terms of relationships and reciprocal influences, the family is seen as a “complex adaptive socio-technical systems” (Barile et al., 2016) where business dynamics are related to family dynamics. Given the number and usage of technological devices by family members (inside and outside businesses), families are not anymore exclusively social environments (i.e., social systems) but also technological ones (i.e., technical systems). These new forces increase the speed of family dynamics and consequently its complexity (i.e., more variables plus more interactions among variables). As a result, it requires more adaptations to environmental dynamics. From here the term “complex adaptive socio-technical systems.” Respecting the recursive property of systems in which one system includes and, at the same time, is included by another system, and where different life contexts are interrelated and contagious to each other (e.g., family and business) (Poutziouris et al., 2008), then the family relationships (e.g., parent-child) within the family might influence the cohesiveness of family relationships within the business (Collins et al., 2012).

Regarding the benefits of cohesive groups in family businesses, it was seen that family cohesiveness – in which members of the owner family feel closeness, have mutual solidarity and the desire to stick together – is a determinant factor for shaping the effect of ownership on organisational learning (Zahra, 2012). Finally, two reports of Ernst and Young in 2014 and 2015 analyse accurately and deeply the phenomenon of family cohesiveness in family business. The reports offer multi-perspectives of team cohesion in family business and its positive impact on financial performance (return on equity) and gender equality. Data show that cohesion is cultivated by branding, trust, and sustainability.

However, in family businesses there are also problems of cohesiveness when it comes to business governance. In a family business the business governance assumes even a more delicate approach since the classical separation between ownership and control (Fama and Jensen, 1983) is less demarcated. Consequently, the family dynamics are mirrored also in the business governance. In one study, family group cohesiveness was considered in relation to the different family generations involved in running the family business. The conclusion drawn was that, when older generations try to impose their perspectives and choices on the younger ones, usually because of generational gap and mentality, conflict arises and may have negative effects on group cohesion (Del Giudice et al., 2010). That situation is also known as the ‘generational shadow’ (Davis and Harveston, 2001). Another study, with a particular focus on the Italian context, looked at

the relationship between board composition and board processes in Italian family businesses. It considered the potential beneficial effects of outside board members on board processes such as effort norms and cohesiveness, finding out that boards with outside directors are perceived as more committed to the board's tasks (i.e., higher effort norms) and more cohesive (Bettinelli, 2011).

Because the literature sustains the premise that members of more cohesive groups tend to conform more to their groups' norms [Myers, (2010), p.213; Schermerhorn et al., (2010), pp.188–189; Carron, 1982; Kinoshita, 1964; Lott and Lott, 1961], and because empirical evidence shows that families and family businesses are more cohesive than other entities (Ensley and Pearson, 2005; Jiménez et al., 2015), it is consequently expected that family businesses governed by family members will demonstrate higher levels of conformity. However, not many studies related to conformity in family businesses have been done (Miller et al., 2012), and they are almost completely absent when it comes to positive conformity (as defined in this study), though the positive influences of family members on each other have been analysed in several studies with different focuses.

From the groupthink decision-making standpoint and the generational one, the involvement of only one generation in running the family business may lead to the groupthink phenomenon, since the interpretation schemes of group members are close to each other and they might see the reality through more similar lenses compared to previous or future generations, though personalities might diverge (Schjoedt et al., 2013).

Referring to the relation between family business governance and conformity, Miller et al. (2012) use the socio-emotional wealth (SEW) approach to investigate whether or not the pursuit of SEW objectives leads to greater strategic conformity among family firms. Their findings suggest that, the more the family is involved in ownership and management, the more likely strategic conformity is to occur. The study by Miller et al. (2012) analyses the impact of family firms' strategic conformity on firm performance, seeing an underlying positive relationship between conformity and return on assets. From a different perspective, Katz et al. (2010) investigate the succession of family business governance and conformity to founders' vision. They state that "perhaps the firm's choices are constrained because of a veto from a retired founder, where the current owners feel the obligation to conform to the founder's original vision of the enterprise" (p.320). Similarly, a KPMG Report in 2011 suggests that the previous generation should not ask the younger generation to conform to precedent cognitive frames at all costs, but rather must ensure that the new leadership team is compatible and cohesive, not in a forced conformity either to each other or to the previous generation. The report also warns that it is counterproductive to force children to work together if they are not compatible.

If the studies regarding cohesiveness in family business show a strong body of evidence, there are few studies on the matter of conformity of family members involved in family businesses (Miller et al., 2012), and next to nothing on the importance of positive conformity in family-owned firms.

### *2.3 The emergence of 'positive conformity'*

The term 'positive conformity' means the act of conforming to other people's positive attitudes for positive outcomes. More specifically, it refers to individual's conformity

toward one or more components of positive psychological capital (i.e., self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resiliency) possessed by one or more group members for a positive organisational behavioural (POB) purpose (e.g., increasing commitment and performance, increasing satisfaction and citizenship behaviour and decreasing voluntary absenteeism and turnover). It depends on circumstances, but the term 'positive' in this work means a necessary alignment of a group member toward the group's positive attitudes as a whole in order to achieve common (positive) goals. Thus, it refers to a requisite conformity as a contingency requirement. It is a state of mood first, and an attitude second, that helps individual members to improve their job satisfaction and group performance. The positive conformity can be individual or social, but in the latter case it should not be confused with the concept of *groupthink*, which means a psychological drive for consensus at any cost that suppresses dissent and appraisal of alternatives in cohesive decision-making groups (Janis, 1972). Although this definition treats positive conformity as an act, it is not a simple act (e.g., mood state) but an attempt to repeat that type of behaviour so that it becomes an automatic mechanism/attitude. Quoting Aristotle (1998), "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit." Ultimately, conformity is a sort of decision-making. You decide how you want to be and, as Robbins (1991) explains, "it is in your moments of decision that your destiny is shaped" (p.40). But when an individual conforms, the decision-making is under pressure. It is very important for the group (or for the leader) to use the most appropriate pressure in accordance with the situation. Since the pressure, as a cause, and the conformity, as an effect, both rely on two constraints (i.e., context and scope), conformity can thus be either positive or negative relative to the kind of pressure used. Hence, the situation and the aim of leader or group must be considered. However, today's leaders must know that obedience is an 'old-fashioned' concept, and the pressure derived from it is ineffective in the long run. Conformity must rely essentially on a horizontal dimension (i.e., alignment/consonance). The leadership influence should be based on persuasion (Cialdini, 2007), not on orders; this is because human resources management becomes more and more a 'marketing' activity [Drucker, (2009), p.31]. Leaders or groups must 'sell' cognitive frames to their members. The basic distinctive traits of leadership, through which leaders change their own and other people's minds, are intelligence (emotional and multiple), visceral instinct and moral integrity [Gardner, (2007), pp.118–122]. These traits can be used to transform an obliged conformity to a voluntary conformity to group norms. The most effective stimulus of a voluntary act is leadership by example, based on work, responsibility and earned trust [Drucker, (2002), pp.220–222]. This is exactly what positive conformity intends: conforming to the positive attitudes of others for a positive purpose.

Though positive conformity is a novel term in the field of organisational studies, coming out only in the present research, it is rooted in scientific evidence. During the '70s the Asian country Bhutan was a subject of accurate analysis made by economists. In 1972, Bhutan's fourth Dragon King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, coined the term 'gross national happiness' as a substitute of GDP. Subsequent research has shown that the conformity of Bhutan's population to this new positively perceived indicator has increased happiness and life quality [Conway, (2010), p.199]. Today this economic branch of study is called 'happiness economics' [Anielski, (2007); Kahneman and Diener, 2004]. Other evidence comes from the field of positive psychology. According to Seligman (2002), the field of positive psychology can be considered at both individual and group level. It is related with past-present-future feelings such as well-being,

satisfaction, happiness, optimism, hope, and faith. Thus, positive psychology is focused, not on mental illness, but on human strengths, acting them as individuals or teams.

Although positive psychology is an emerging science (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), it was Maslow (1962) who coined the term in his book, *Toward a Psychology of Being*. Maslow dedicated a chapter to this topic (Chapter 6 – ‘Cognition of being in the peak-experiences’), saying, “This is then a chapter in the “positive psychology,” or “orthopsychology,” of the future in that it deals with fully functioning and healthy human beings, and not alone with normally sick ones” [Maslow, (1962), p.85].

The scientific movement of positive psychology has been a catalyst for studies on how to induce positive behaviour within organisations. This positive trend embraces two ramifications: positive organisational scholarship (POS), which focuses on positive outcomes and attributes such as excellence, flourishing, thriving, virtuousness and resilience in individuals, groups and organisations (Cameron et al., 2003; Cameron and Spreitzer, 2012), and POB (Ashkanasy and Ashton-James, 2007; Luthans, 2002a, 2002b; Nelson and Cooper, 2007). POB has been defined as “the study and application of positive oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace” [Luthans, (2002b), p.59]. It encompasses several relevant components: self-efficacy/confidence, hope, optimism, and resiliency.

- *Self-efficacy*: It is a personal conviction or belief about performing successfully, or not, a specific task. It is context-specific and competence-based. Self-efficacy is influenced by contingency factors, past analogous experiences, and interpretation of achieved goals. The concept of self-efficacy was developed by Albert Bandura in his social cognitive theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1977, 1997) and has relevant implications in the workplace. A meta-analysis of 114 studies and 21,616 subjects showed a .38 weighted average correlation between self-efficacy and task performance (Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998). Another recent study shows a significant relation of self-efficacy to work performance and job satisfaction (Luthans et al., 2007a).
- *Hope*: Snyder et al. (1991, p.287) define hope as “a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (1) agency (goal-directed energy) and (2) pathways (planning to meet goals).” Simply put, hope is based on motivational forces (agency) and strategic thought (pathways). Workplace research has found that higher hope among human resources has a more positive impact on profits, job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Adams et al., 2010).
- *Optimism*: The main exponents in the field are, on one side, Carver and Scheier and, on the other side, Martin Seligman. For Carver and Scheier the concept of optimism is related to expectancy-value theory. In simple terms, for the authors, “Optimists are people who expect good things to happen to them; pessimists are people who expect bad things to happen to them” [Carver and Scheier, (2002), p.231]. In addition, Seligman connects optimism with causal attributions (i.e., attribution theory). He makes use of the term *explanatory style* in order to indicate how people interpret personal events, pointing up that optimism is a dynamic attitude (state-like) that can be learned (Seligman, 2006). In the workplace, optimists are highly motivated and feel satisfaction in their jobs, define more stressed objectives, attribute failure to environmental factors (external causes) and do not underestimate their capabilities

[Luthans, (2011), p.214]. Other research has shown optimism as an attitude positively related to employee performance, job satisfaction and work happiness (Youssef and Luthans, 2007). Further interesting evidence shows that, the more optimistic the leader, the more optimistic the followers, which reveals that optimism is contagious (Wunderley et al., 1998).

- *Resiliency*: It is defined by positive psychology scholars as ‘a class of phenomena characterised by patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant adversity or risk’ [Masten and Reed, (2002), p.75]. Resiliency is an important component, especially in times of organisational turbulence and crisis. Research on this topic has shown a positive correlation of resilience with job satisfaction, work happiness and organisational commitment (Youssef and Luthans, 2007). Resilience has also been considered by the viable systems approach as an important tool for decision-making and strategic communication (Barile and Casula, 2011). In fact, in viable systems terms, resilience coincides with the concept of flexibility, which can be deliberate or innovative (Golinelli, 2010). Deliberate flexibility comes out when the decision maker has predicted options-based planning [Williams, (2007), p.140] or situational plans inserted within the extended structure. Conversely, innovative flexibility emerges without a ‘backup plan’; it is an invention of the moment allowing the decision maker to face an intuitive and creative task.

When the above-mentioned components (self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resiliency) are combined with each other, they create a powerful driver of POB, namely ‘positive psychological capital’ (PsyCap). PsyCap is based on the first absolute postulate of systems thinking: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Therefore, when self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resiliency are used synergistically, they are expected to have a greater impact on organisational behaviour outcomes than the single impact of each component would suggest [Luthans et al., (2007), p.19].

From the literature review, there are some clues that can allow us to believe that positive attitudes, like optimism for example, can affect the behaviour of group members to conform to these attitudes. If these positive attitudes are spread among the majority of group members, then they can cause an influence (i.e., ‘social pressure’) on the single individual, which will probably conform to others’ positive attitudes in order to be part of the group. This influence is expected to be higher in families in general, and family businesses in particular, since the family is the most cohesive and fundamental institution in all societies. Therefore, following this logic, a hypothesis arises:

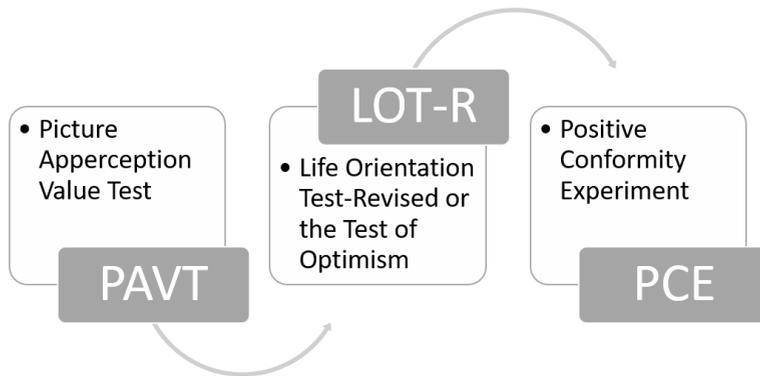
Hypothesis H<sub>1</sub> The positive social pressure of cohesive group members within family businesses, intended as an influence based on optimism, can cause to the less optimistic group member a positive conformity, intended as a conformity toward other members’ positive attitudes such as optimism.

### 3 Methodology

In this study we report all measures and manipulations. This paper includes an explanatory/explicative research design. It is explanatory because it explains ‘why things are going in a certain way’ [de Vaus, (2001), pp.1–3]. The basic methods used for the explanatory aims are the picture apperception value test (PAVT) (Barile et al., 2018), the

test of optimism or life orientation test–revised (LOT-R) (Scheier et al., 1994; Carver and Scheier, 2002), and the positive conformity experiment (PCE). The first two tests are instrumental for the successive PCE. The third assumes the shape of a quasi-experiment design. Figure 1 represents a flowchart of the methodology.

**Figure 1** Flowchart of the methodology



The setting of this study is cross-cultural, involving three countries: Italy, Albania and Kosovo. All the participating businesses were small family businesses with four to five family members of different generations directly involved in the business. 193 family businesses were composed of four members; the other 147 ones were composed of five members. All the mentioned members were actively involved in the business. In total, 340 family businesses were analysed, of which 187 were in Italy, 90 in Albania and 63 in Kosovo. The sample is a non-probability sampling relying mostly on convenience sampling (e.g., we have reached out small family businesses through chambers of commerce and other business associations). But at some extent it relied also on the purposive sampling as we have classified family businesses into small ones, including 4 to 5 members. This was done in order to have a better focus and less complexity in data gathering and data processing

In the stage of group cohesiveness measurement, the sample size refers to the whole participants from 340 family businesses, namely 1,507 participants who participated in the procedure of PAVT ( $193 \times 4 + 147 \times 5$ ). However, in the next stages – the ones of optimism's test and PCE – the sample size was reduced to only cohesive groups in family businesses. Thus, only 129 family businesses were taken into consideration for these stages and the overall participants were 557 ( $88 \times 4 + 41 \times 5$ ). Out of them, 129 were naïve (experimental cavies), and the rest (428) were confederates. Sample size was determined before any data analysis.

### 3.1 *Measuring family business members' cohesiveness with the PAVT*

To achieve the purpose of this paper, which is to offer a positive perspective on the conformity concept within cohesive families that operate businesses (not simply within social aggregates, as in Asch's conformity experiment), it seems mandatory not only to create groups – which in this case are already created since they are families – but also to measure conformity within cohesive families characterised by harmonic relationships

(i.e., consonant families). Right now, it is necessary to distinguish a *group* from a *social aggregate*. According to Hogg and Vaughan (2011, p.273), when we talk about a random collection of people without relationship history and a common purpose, “more likely these are merely social aggregates, collections of unrelated individuals – not groups at all.” The cohesiveness level is measured because, the more cohesive a group is the more pressure is exercised by group members on the single individual and, consequently, the higher the probability to conform to the group’s attitudes and norms (as stated in the introduction). Thus, this study differs from Asch’s (1955) conformity experiment, performed with aggregates, and simultaneously from that of Deutsch and Gerard (1955) performed with groups where their cohesiveness degree had not been considered.

Recalling again the empirical evidence about the positive relationship among cohesion, performance, and job satisfaction, it becomes relevant for this study to test the positive conformity only on cohesive members of family businesses. In synthesis, the present research differs from others because:

- 1 it deals with the conformity phenomenon in a positive way by using the novel term ‘positive conformity’
- 2 it considers groups, and furthermore cohesive ones, for performing the PCE, using a novel test for measuring cohesiveness (i.e., PAVT)
- 3 the application context is the family business.

The first step of the empirical design regards the measurement of group cohesiveness in family businesses by using the PAVT. The scope of this step is to evaluate the cohesiveness (based on macro-categorical values) within small family businesses. Through the following procedure, it was possible to classify the groups being studied in accordance with their system of values and to measure the degree of cohesiveness of family members involved within each family business.

The PAVT (Barile et al., 2018)<sup>1</sup> combines the logical structure of the thematic apperception test, known also as the picture interpretation technique (Murray, 1943), with the logical structure of value surveys (Ericson, 1969; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1999, 2006; Hofstede et al., 2010; Barile, 2011). More precisely, the general technique of picture apperception was combined with Barile’s survey on categorical values (Barile, 2011).

Referring to the procedural steps of the test, firstly, in an *ad hoc* session, the meanings of categorical values and macro-categorical values derived from them were explained to the participants. Barile’s (2011) survey has shown that, from a list of human categorical values, using the statistical techniques of principal component analysis and factor analysis, it is possible to identify common factors called macro-categorical values (i.e., universal human values). These macro-categorical values can be expressed as a continuum between extreme states/pairs, as follows:

- 1 ethical conduct (from being abusive to being respectful and responsible)
- 2 desire for success (from being indolent and passive to being supernatural and delirious)
- 3 sense of duty (from indifference to ‘self-sacrifice’)
- 4 focus on social relationships (from egoism and individualism to extreme altruism)

- 5 seeking consensus (from personal image and credibility to usefulness for the community)
- 6 opportunistic behaviour (from abusing others with power/authority for personal gains to dedicating oneself to the accomplishment of organisational goals).

After that, it was explained to the participants that different persons have different hierarchies of macro-categorical values, and the same person's hierarchy might vary when the interactional context changes. Above all, it was made clear to each family member that each of the values listed above assumes a typical trend like a Gaussian distribution, or a trend that goes from one extreme/state to another, appointing conceptually opposing pairs of objects, subjects, concepts, events, etc. (e.g., bad-good, black-white, small-big, etc.). Therefore, in order to express each of the macro-categorical values as a normal distribution, Osgood's semantic differential, a scaling technique with a range 1–7, was used (Osgood, 1952; Osgood et al., 1957). The choice of the semantic differential was not casual. This instrument was created by Charles Osgood and colleagues to measure the meaning of concepts. It is based on the subjective perception that individuals make inside the surrounding environment of objects, events, figures, other individuals, and so on. Hence, the semantic differential becomes a connection bridge between value surveys and picture perception/interpretation techniques. However, it is necessary to underline that the scientific basis of PAVT goes beyond the semantic differential. A picture serves as a stimulus for the brain's visual cortex, which activates emotions. Because emotions are strongly linked with values, we use responses to the projection of some casual, emotion-evoking images to draw inferences about the values of family members, as explained below. According to Härtel et al. (2005, p.29), "Emotions can express meanings and understanding because strong judgments and values are anchored in emotions and struggling." This is also sustained by Taylor (1995) and Kirkeby (2001) and dates back in Aristotle's (1998) idea. Thus, by stimulating emotions through pictures, it is possible to ferret out the values (this is shown on the PAVT procedure).

Once the participants understood the concepts of categorical values, macro-categorical values and semantic differential, the procedure continued (in another *ad hoc* session) with the execution of the PAVT. The participants were given two documents: one containing only the macro-categorical values, each of them specified by the defined semantic differential pairs, the other containing the number of pictures projected on the screen, the list of macro-categorical values per picture and the 1–7 scale for each picture and for each macro-categorical value. In other words, the first document was consultative, and the second was the document of data collection on which participants had to give their answers. The question now is: what kind of answers? At this stage, a PowerPoint presentation was projected onto a large screen. One by one, 20 pictures were presented in a sequence of about six seconds each (with each one followed by about 36 seconds for the participants to answer/react). The pictures were chosen in accordance with some categories such as objects, subjects, locations, events, etc. Each one of the pictures served as a stimulus to give an answer. Thus, the pictures played the same role that questions play on a questionnaire. In other words, considering context and purpose, we describe pictures and questions as functionally synonymous. In practice, for each picture the participants followed these guidelines:

- a Ask yourself: How many macro-categorical values (one, more than one, or nothing) does this picture transmit to me?
- b Then look directly at document 1, with the aim to have a brief look at all the listed values and their extremes (pairs); look them over quickly one by one.
- c After choosing the stimulated macro-categorical values, look at the scale from 1–7 in document 2, and then circle a number within the scale next to each value chosen.

### 3.2 *Identifying the less optimistic with the LOT-R*

The test of optimism employed here is based on the LOT-R (Scheier et al., 1994; Carver and Scheier, 2002).<sup>2</sup> The aim of using this test is to identify within the consonant groups the ‘cavies’, or the most pessimistic members (one for each family group) on whom to exert positive social influence based on optimism, with the aim to achieve a positive conformity in the next experiment. So, the experiment’s purpose is to transform a negative attitude-based person into a positive one through the social pressure coming from the positive attitudes of others. This study is focused only on optimism as a positive attitude and not on all the components of psychological capital. In order to identify the least optimistic person per group to be influenced, it was necessary to measure the optimism level of every potential participant in the experiment. Only the cohesive groups within each family business, as determined by the results of the PAVT procedure, were asked to complete the LOT-R questionnaire prepared by Scheier et al. (1994) aiming to select the less optimistic member to be positively influenced in the last procedure of the PCE.

### 3.3 *The PCE*

The last and conclusive phase is the execution of the PCE. The experimental design is like that of Asch’s visual judgment or conformity experiment (Asch, 1955). However, there are substantial differences from Asch’s experiment. First, as previously noted, the experiment of the present study is directed at cohesive groups rather than just social aggregates [Deutsch and Gerard, 1955; Hogg and Vaughan, (2011), p.273]. Second, despite the logical structure of the experiment, which is based on social influence/pressure (like Asch’s experiment), the modality of execution is based on positive conformity.

Regarding the experimental design, since the current experiment fulfils the conditions of having both independent and dependent variables but does not follow a randomisation procedure, it is a quasi-experiment design (Campbell and Stanley, 1963). In social research it is almost impossible to randomise the subjects in groups, particularly in situations involving pre-established groups [Corbetta, (1999), p.159]. Therefore, because the following experiment was conducted on pre-established groups (i.e., families), it can be called a quasi-experiment, that is, an experimental design that has treatment, observations and experimental groups but does not utilise the procedure of randomisation [Cook and Campbell, (1979), p.6].

The experimental technique used is the technique *after-only with control design*, where there is present an experimental group, an experimental action that influences one or more independent variables and a successive measurement on the dependent variable

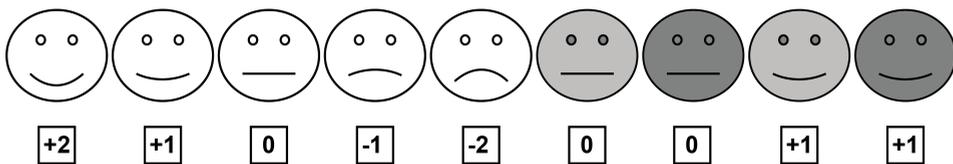
[Barile and Metallo, (1994), p.37]. This technique is also known as a single-shot technique due to a single measurement during the experimentation.

Regarding the variables considered in this experiment, the independent variable (X) is represented by the (positive) *group influence/pressure based on optimism*, and the dependent variable (Y) is the (positive) *conformity towards optimism* caused by the group influence/pressure.

In keeping with this study's purpose and respecting the differences from Asch's experiment and Deutsch and Gerard's, the experiment in this study was performed only on cohesive groups as selected through the PAVT procedure. Therefore, anticipating some of the results, only 129 of 340 the business-owning families showed themselves to be cohesive in terms of categorical values used in this study. Thus, a total of 129 groups participated in the final experiment, each of them belonging to a family business.

In other words, groups were chosen to participate according to their degrees of cohesiveness. They were mainly composed of four or five members, of whom only one member per family business group was the naïve. Differently from Asch's experiment (i.e., the cards with lines), the participants in the PCE were given pieces of papers (not showed publicly by the experimenters) containing smiling, sad and neutral faces (nine pieces with nine faces) as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2** Smiling faces



The reason why the faces were not shown publicly is that those delivered to the confederates had incorporated responses, avoiding the possibility for confederates to make mistakes during the procedure. In psychological experiments, a confederate is an accomplice of the experimenter (also known as a 'stooge') or an actor who participates in a psychological experiment, pretending to be a subject but in actuality working for the researcher [Myers, (2010), p.164].

The smiling degree was evaluated having as a reference point the Likert scale, varying from  $-2$  (a sad face) to  $+2$  (a happy face), as shown in Figure 2.

The faces were chosen with the aim of showing how the group's assessment of a certain face influences the assessment by a single member on whom pressure is exerted. The experiment was projected in such a way that confederates would overestimate the smiling degree. In this way, they could transfer more optimism towards the naïve. The last four faces (counting from left to right) were coloured with different intensity in order to influence the perceived pressure of the group.

The experiment was organised in eight interconnected steps. There were nine smiling faces exposed. The exposure order was from the first picture to the ninth one, counting from left to right (see Figure 2). In the first step the first two pictures (i.e., faces) were distributed with smile levels  $+2$  and  $+1$ . The reason was to show to the naïve the obvious difference between a smile of  $+2$  and a smile of  $+1$ .

After the distribution of faces, the experimenter waited some seconds and then, for the first round, asked for the naïf's response first. After the naïve answered, then the

experimenter asked the confederates (one by one). In that first round, they approved what the naïve said. This was to create some confidence and trust.

In the second round, the third picture (smile = 0) was delivered. Now, the naïve was asked to give his/her answer after two confederates, and immediately after the naïve another confederate responded. In this round, the first confederate said '+1', as did the second. After that the naïve's answer was solicited, and finally the last confederate, like the first two, said '+1'.

In the third round (picture number four, smile = -1), the same responding order was followed. Following the same procedure, the first two confederates (in order, one after the other) said '0'. After that, the naïve was called on, and then the last confederate confirmed the number 0.

In the fourth turn, the naïve was asked immediately after the first confederate's answer was given. For this round, the picture had a smile level of -2 (i.e., picture number five). Confederates were instructed to say '-1'. The sequence of respondents was as follows: confederate, naïve, confederate, confederate.

During the fifth turn (picture number six, smile = 0), the colour of the picture was changed. (This influences the perception.) Here, the naïve was asked after all the confederates had given their answers. The order had been decided in such a way that the group pressure and the unanimity would weigh more on the naïf's opinion. After the confederates had said (in order, one by one) '+1', lastly the naïve was heard.

In the sixth round (picture number seven, smile = 0), in order to test if the group pressure had made an effect or not, the naïve was called on first. Then, the other confederates responded '+1'.

The seventh turn (picture number eight, smile = +1) followed the same order and logic of the fifth turn. The difference was the real smile degree, +1, and the answers of the confederates, +2.

Finally, the eighth round (picture number nine, smile = +1) followed the same order and logic of the sixth step. In the last picture, the answers of the confederates (+2) do not matter, because the naïve responded first and his/her answer was connected with the effect (group influence) achieved in the earlier steps.

#### 4 Data analysis

Starting from the PAVT or the test of consonance/cohesiveness, for each macro-categorical value (six in total), correspondingly to each group (129 in total) and to each picture (20 in total), the *mean* (average), the *standard deviation* (SD) – comprising also the numerical values of the *minimum standard deviation* ( $SD_{\min}$ ) and the *maximum standard deviation* ( $SD_{\max}$ ) – the *coefficient of variation* (CV) and the *relative standard deviation ratio* ( $RSD_R$ ) were calculated.

$SD_{\min}$ , naturally, always assumes the numerical value 0.

$SD_{\max}$  for a finite set of group members represents the alternation between maximum numerical values and minimum numerical values of responses given by the group members. In this work, the maximum numerical value corresponds to the number 7, which is the maximum value of the semantic differential scale, or the maximum value of a response. The minimum numerical value corresponds to the number 0, which is a 'non-response' of a participant during the test. So, for each picture, participants were free to choose whether to give an answer (i.e., a number within the range of the semantic

differential scale) for each respective macro-categorical value. This depended mostly on the stimulus degree that every exposed picture activated in participants' brains for every specific macro-categorical value, and probably (although partially) in other moderating variables that influenced participants' perception. In the case of a chosen answer the variation range was from 1 to 7 (in reference to the scale). In case of a non-response, the number 0 was automatically inserted within the program as the numerical value corresponding to a non-response.

Another important point to be underlined is that  $SD_{\max}$  has the same numerical value for all the groups with the same quantity of members. For instance, groups with four members have an  $SD_{\max} = 4.0414$ , and groups with five members have an  $SD_{\max} = 3.8341$ .

As can be deduced, the usage purpose of  $SD_{\max}$  is to homogenise groups to compare them meaningfully with each other. In order to compare numerically different groups with each other, and to determine correctly the most cohesive (consonant) groups, not only the SD of each group was used, but also the  $RSD_R^3$ , which was obtained as a ratio between SD and  $SD_{\max}$ , as shown in the following formula:

$$RSD_R(i, n) = \frac{SD(i, n)}{SD_{\max}(n)}$$

Thus, in order to have an available indicator of evidence that assumes a precise range of values and to compare groups of different sizes, the use of the  $RSD_R(i, n)$ , for a generic group  $i$  with  $n$  members, is preferred. It is simply obtained by dividing  $SD(i, n)$  for its maximum value  $SD_{\max}(n)$ , given that  $SD_{\max}(n)$  always exists and is finite for a finite range of macro-categorical values' responses (those from 0 to 7 on the semantic differential scale). This way, we determine that  $0 \leq RSD_R(i, n) \leq 1$ ,  $\forall i$  and  $\forall n$  finite, and  $L_R(\Theta)$  can be considered as an index of experimental evidence in favour of group  $i$  consonance, based on the observed group range of macro-categorical values. When there is a particular set of data, the  $RSD_R(i, n)$ , provides a natural basis for assessing the plausibility of different SD values, and can be interpreted as follows:

$$\frac{1}{2} < RSD_R(i, n) \leq 1 \Leftrightarrow \text{Cohesiveness is not supported.}$$

$$0 \leq RSD_R(i, n) < \frac{1}{2} \Leftrightarrow \text{Cohesiveness is supported.}$$

As a supportive statistical measure, the  $CV$  was also used, obtained as a fraction between SD and average (mean), as shown below:

$$CV(i, n) = \frac{SD(i, n)}{Mean}$$

The CV shows the dispersion of data in a data series around the mean. It is a useful statistical tool for comparing the degree of variation from one data series to another, even if the means are drastically different from one another. The lower the CV, the higher the cohesiveness.

In sum, to each group and picture are six corresponding macro-categorical values; in other words, to each macro-categorical value are 53 corresponding groups and 20 pictures. Family group members gave their answers based on every picture and every macro-categorical value. After that, for each group and picture, the average, the SD, the

$SD_{\max}$ , the CV and the  $RSD_R$  were calculated for group 1, group 2 ... group 129 (going vertically down) and for pictures P1, P2 ... P20 (going horizontally right). It means that after the answers for each picture per group there were six averages, six SDs, six  $SD_{\max}$ , six CVs, and six  $RSD_R$ , as far as were also macro-categorical values. Because there were 20 pictures in total, it was necessary to calculate for each group the total values of average, SD,  $SD_{\max}$ , CV and  $RSD_R$  related to the six macro-categorical values. The total average of each macro-categorical value was calculated as the sum of the single averages corresponding to each picture (i.e., 20 single averages for each macro-categorical value per group). The total SD of each macro-categorical value was calculated as the square root of the sum of the single squared deviations in reference to the 20 pictures per group. The total  $SD_{\max}$  of each macro-categorical value was obtained as the square root of the sum of the max-squared deviations related to the 20 pictures per group. The total CV and the total  $RSD_R$  were obtained from the above-mentioned total values respecting the specific formulas. Finally, in order to measure the cohesiveness of each group, it was necessary to obtain unique final values that would have been considered as comparative values for the definition of the most consonant groups. Thus, the final average of each group was defined as the average of the six total averages corresponding to the six macro-categorical values. The final SD was calculated as the square root of the sum of the total squared deviations corresponding to the six macro-categorical values. The final  $SD_{\max}$  was calculated as the square root of the sum of the total max-squared deviations related to the six macro-categorical values. Consequently, the final values of CV and  $RSD_R$  were obtained from the above final values of average, SD and  $SD_{\max}$  with regard to the respective formulas.

Regarding the analysis of the data gathered through the LOT-R (Scheier et al., 1994; Carver and Scheier, 2002) or the test of optimism, this was not a complicated issue since the test is just a questionnaire with ten items, where at the end a score is registered for every group member. The member with the lowest score in the group for every group (129 in total) was the experimental cavy or the naïve. Thus, there were 129 naïve in total ready for the next experiment.

Finally, for the data analysis of the PCE it was necessary only to count the cases of members who conformed and those who did not. However, beyond the results, at the end of the experiment a face to face conversation was held with every naïve in order to understand the reasons why he or she conformed or refused to do so.

## 5 Findings and discussion

The results of the PAVT, which measured the cohesiveness degree (in accordance to the macro-categorical values of each group member) within every participating group, are expressed through the  $RSD_R$ . For the answers on the scale of semantic differential given by the participants during the PAVT, according to their macro-categorical values, the final mean, the final SD, the final CV, the final minimum standard deviation ( $SD_{\min}$ ), the final maximum standard deviation ( $SD_{\max}$ ) and the final  $RSD_R$  were measured for each group.

The numerical values of averages of every group were useful for the successive calculation of SD. In turn, the SD was indispensable for measuring the cohesiveness through the  $RSD_R$ , which was calculated as a fraction between SD and  $SD_{\max}$ . When there is a particular set of data, the  $RSD_R(i, n)$ , provides a natural basis for assessing the

plausibility of different SD values. The lower the  $RSD_R$ , the higher the cohesiveness. Because the  $RSD_R$  varies between 0 and 1, the most cohesive groups are those with  $RSD_R < 0.5$ . Specifically, only the groups with  $0 \leq RSD_R(i, n) < \frac{1}{2}$  were considered as consonant. SD was also necessary for measuring the CV, obtained as a division between SD and mean (average). The CV shows the dispersion of data in a data series around the mean. It is a useful statistical tool for comparing the degree of variation from one data series to another, even if the means are drastically different from one another. The lower the CV, the higher the cohesiveness. The CV was supportive of the results of the  $RSD_R$ .

As previously mentioned, from 340 family businesses, after the PAVT procedure, only 129 of them proved to be cohesive by showing an  $RSD_R$  lower than 0.5. Consequently, for all the other groups with a higher deviation, cohesiveness was not supported and, accordingly, those groups were not included in the PCE.

It is essential to underline the importance that family values play in family businesses. Family is the primary source of values that individuals encounter first in their lives. In addition, most of these values are transferred also in the family business. They create the foundation of the organisational culture. Nevertheless, as the results show, not all the families are highly cohesive in terms of values. Especially in this dynamic and multicultural world, people grow up with multilateral influences and their categorical values are not a simple mirror of their families. The more the family members are exposed to multi-source influences, the higher their divergence in terms of values. In substance, even though it is expected that all the family businesses must be internally cohesive because the family is the nucleus of the society and the central source of human values, as the results show, many families are divergent inside. There are many reasons for these divergences. It is not the aim of our study to explore them, but, just to mention a few, some of the common sources of dissonance of values in families and family businesses today appear to be the lack of work-family balance, societal identity crises in developed countries, the pressure of financial conditions that constrain parent to work more and to educate children less, media and social media influence, personality traits, and the unchangeable generational gap.

Regarding the results of the revised life orientation test (LOT-R), in each family business one of the members was less optimistic than the others. Thus, in the 129 cohesive family groups, we had 129 'pessimists' to be positively influenced by other 'optimist' members during the quasi-experiment. Finally, since this test is mainly descriptive, there are no special explanations about the results. Furthermore, the authors were not interested in knowing why one group member was more/less optimistic than the others. The only purpose of the test was to measure the propensity of the less optimistic group members to be positively influenced through others' positive attitudes (i.e., optimism). This is important in the business context because optimism is contagious and increases job performance, job satisfaction and work happiness, as stated before in the literature review.

Lastly, for the results of the PCE, three categories have been identified. In the first category are included all the members who directly yielded to the group pressure without bouncing back to the initial position (54 cases in total from 129 naïve). For simplicity, we call persons in this category the 'conformists'. The second category includes all those cases who conformed in some steps of the experiment but later refused to do it anymore (46 cases). Therefore, they were not consistent. We call this category 'oscillators'. The

final category is that of the ‘resisters’, that is, all the members who did not yield to family group pressure at all (29 cases).

In order to make an interpretation of the results, it is opportune to analyse the typology of these cases one by one, starting with the ‘oscillators’ category. In the ‘oscillators’ category, the results seem to be contradictory. The influence of confederates on the naïve was successful although incomplete. Up to some stages of the experiment the naïve resisted the influence of family group members. Later, the naïve conformed to the group’s opinion (i.e., optimism). The conformity continued also in other stages, but in the ending stages the naïve changed opinion again, expressing a lower degree of optimism compared with that of confederates. This situation can probably be explained with the theory of information variety (Barile, 2011), which defines every group member as a viable system or an information variety composed of information units, interpretation schemes, and categorical values. Categorical values are responsible for resistance to change; they cushion the social influence by returning the individual to the early state. When an individual conforms only in terms of public compliance and not in private acceptance (i.e., identification versus internalisation) (Kelman, 1958), then it is probable that in a second moment the individual will show non-conformity. This happens when the belief system of an individual remains untouched owing to the resistance posed by categorical values. Nevertheless, the aim of the PCE or, in general, the aim of social influence based on positive attitudes is not to change somebody within and between a few moments. The initial efforts have as an objective to ‘constrain’ the individual through the group pressure to conform, hoping that the conformity of the moment becomes a ‘subconscious’ mechanism or a positive attitude of the future. Transforming a pessimistic attitude into a positive one does not mean that individuals should never have a pessimistic viewpoint; otherwise it could be a pathological situation. Following this trend, the public compliance of the present becomes a private acceptance in the future. However, in the experiment with the ‘oscillators’ class, it can be said that conformity was partially achieved, though a non-conforming act was shown again later by the naïve.

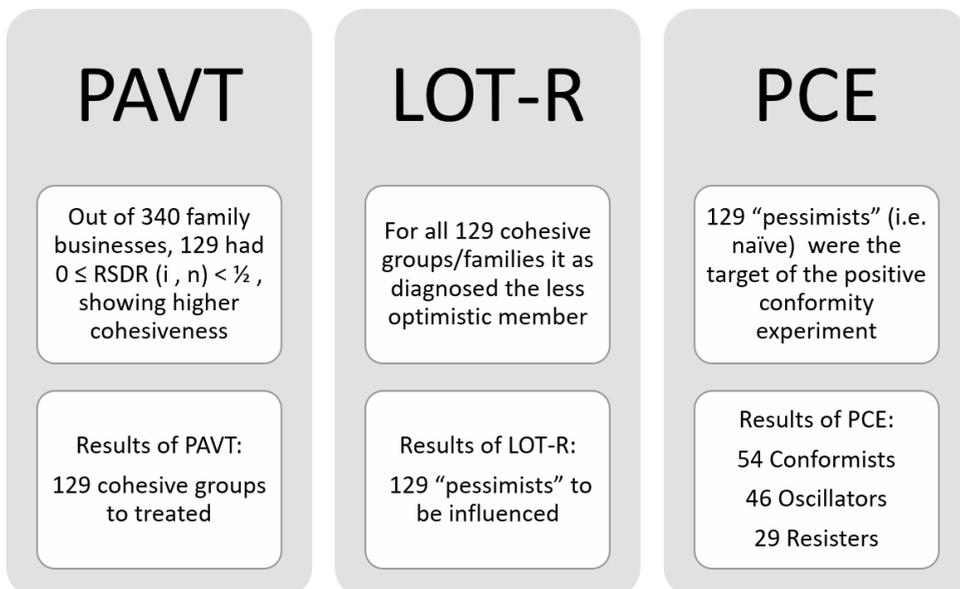
The post-experiment explanations from the naïve who conformed about the reasons why they conformed were interesting. Most of them did not admit that their conformity behaviour was caused by the group pressure. In their view, it was because of the colour change of the smiling faces that they conformed. There are two explanations of the coloured faces. First, chromatographers and psychologists of personality would explain the incremental percentages of grey colour as an incremental dosage of pessimism or, in general, as a negative reference. Studies that have made use of semantic differential, support this view (Adams and Osgood, 1973; Whitfield and Wiltshire, 1990). Second, if we make a parallel of the faces with a water glass, it can be said that the white face is an empty glass and the grey face is a filled glass (fill level depends on the intensity of grey). When we pass from a white face (empty glass) to a grey face (filled glass), the optimism increases due to the precedent reference point. Hence, the reference point is very important. Evidence has shown that, in experiments about frame selection, framing effect (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981) and reference points, individuals tended to describe a 4-ounce cup filled to the 2-ounce line as half full if it was previously empty but described it as half empty if it was previously full (McKenzie and Nelson, 2003). The same happens with the faces. The participants interpreted changes in the colour of the face like changes in the water level in a glass. So, their opinion in most cases coincided with the second variant of interpretation about the coloured face. In other words, a white face has been perceived by the naïve as an empty glass, despite the smiling degree that was

designed on the face. Passing then from a white face to a grey face, the naïve perceived an increment of optimism, because initially the glass was empty (i.e., the white face) and later became full (i.e., the grey face).

The class of ‘conformists’ shows positive results. In fact, the naïve initially resisted but in the later stages yielded to the group pressure. Even in the cases where the naïve yielded in the last stages, the tendency toward change in opinion had been seen since the middle phases. For example, in several cases the naïve scored the smile degree at the seventh phase, which was the same with the first stage, with a different score. In stage one the naïve scored the second smiling face with 0, and in stage seven the same face was scored with +1. Although the group evaluated the face of stage seven with +2 and the naïve evaluated it with +1, the optimistic perspective of the naïve changed from the precedent perspectives, because the same face was assessed with a minor score previously and with a greater one successively. Nonetheless, at the eighth stage the naïve conformed totally with the group’s opinion. This is a typical case of progressive conformity to the group’s optimistic orientation. In the interviews, the majority of the ‘conformists’ declared that conformity to the family members comes out naturally. Perhaps this occurs with higher frequency in all those family businesses in which family members are strongly attached to each other. Culture is also a factor not to underestimate. Especially in the Mediterranean area and Western Balkans, the family plays a crucial role in life and consequently in business.

Finally, the ‘resisters’ showed a persistent resistance and did not conform in any case to family members’ opinion. Thus, in this category the positive conformity was not recorded. Once the experiment was concluded, some said in the interviews that they did not conform because they think they are right in what they judge; others attributed it to their personality and individualism. Therefore, it would be interesting to relate future studies with personality matters and character. Figure 3 shows a summary of the research findings.

**Figure 3** Summary of the research findings



### 5.1 *Conclusive remarks*

In conclusion, the present study on the influence that positive attitudes have on individuals' conformity shows that positive conformity is a frequent phenomenon. This is a fundamental result of this work because it gives an answer to the Hypothesis H<sub>1</sub>. Thus, given the appropriate conditions, positive conformity can be stimulated by the positive attitudes (e.g., optimism) of group members and can be achieved in cohesive groups of family businesses. According to the experimental results, it can be affirmed the conformity is a general law, in the sense that conformity behaviour occurs toward both negative and positive attitudes, as supported also by previous studies. Since conformity is a reaction, the intentionality rooted in the exerted influence is a determinant for the consequences that follow. In other words, conformity is like a fluid: it assumes the shape of the container in which it is inserted.

Regarding the study implications, the current research provides a positive perspective on the conformity concept within groups, until now seen by the consolidated literature mainly as a lack of independence of individuals' behaviour, or at least not defined directly (even when attempts are made) as a positive component of group dynamics and even less of family business dynamics. With the intervention of positive attitudes, family business governing bodies or their appointed managers can create a positive workplace where family business members and other employees can achieve high job performance, enhancing the subjective well-being as well. In a family business the business management assumes even a more delicate approach since the classical separation between ownership and control (Fama and Jensen, 1983) is less demarcated. Consequently, the family dynamics are mirrored also in the business dynamics. This happens due to the family pressure. Therefore, it is an important managerial implication to keep under control the social pressure coming from family members. In case it is a positive pressure based on positive attitudes then it may create a positive environment for productivity. However, since positivity might be biased (e.g., a state of hyper-optimism), influencing the decision-making, then the positivity degree must be calibrated in the specific contingency.

When interpreting the results of this study, readers should consider the following limitations, which may affect the generalisability of the results. During the execution of tests, situational factors, such as the individuals' emotions and mood, can cause deviations. Hence, the results might be affected. A cultural limitation is also present. All the participants belonging to the sample are of Mediterranean and Western Balkans origin. Though the present study has the advantage of a cross-cultural research, the results cannot be generalised without making further tests and experiments in other cultures. As it can be inferred, the family is to a great extent a mirror of society's culture. Another limitation is the experiment itself, which is based only on optimism as one of the components of psychological capital. Since the empirical evidence shows that the elements of psychological capital have a greater impact on performance when used in combination than when used alone, the design of the present study can be seen simultaneously as a limitation and as a recommendation for future research.

As further recommendations, we suggest testing positive conformity in other components of PsyCap such as hope, self-efficacy and resiliency. Also, other experiments can be conducted about emotional intelligence and subjective wellbeing. Finally, a holistic PCE can be realised simultaneously with all the positive components of PsyCap. Nevertheless, because the PCE is a pioneering experiment about the positive influence on

changing others' pessimistic views, further studies can be performed using different dimensions of Luthan's PsyCap, in different business contexts and cultures.

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## Notes

- 1 It must be emphasised that the PAVT procedure finds a replication in the current research.
- 2 Check directly online the questionnaire of the quoted authors in the following link [online] <http://www.psy.miami.edu/faculty/ccarver/sclLOT-R.html>.
- 3 The present is a new and a different measure from the classical relative SD, which is obtained as a percentage of the division between standard deviation and mean, expressing the absolute value of CV. The RSD<sub>R</sub> is also different from Tushar's standard deviation ratio (SDR), which was developed by Tushar (1992) in order to indicate the variable moving average (VMA), or the volatility index dynamic average (VIDYA).