

Margaret  
Cunninggim  
Women's Center

## Gender and conformity: A struggle for expression

*Penny Brooks, professor of psychology  
and associate dean, Peabody College*

There is a sense in which all human beings conform. As a species, most of us stand upright, use our hands as tools, express pain and joy, and use language. We also conform to our culture's norms as in observing social customs such as our use of eye contact, turn taking, social distance, rules of elimination, eating, and so forth. Our culture also dictates our conformity to sex role stereotypes.

The notion of conformity, however, carries with it some negative connotations. Conformity is often viewed as a weakness, a mindless adherence to certain customs. This kind of conformity is more often attributed to women than men, and can be seen in a number of domains. For example, in the "appearance industry," women feel they must look a prescribed way or be ostracized, and in the homemaking domain women feel they must do a particular set of activities in order to make their husbands, their families, or themselves look good.

There is still a third domain of conformity that most of us are vaguely aware of—that of acquiescence, changing our opinions to go along with the group or dominant person.

Is this kind of conformity a myth or is it a common event?

Social psychological experiments have found over and over that women are more likely than men to change their opinions if they differ from those of the group. Women are even more likely to change their opinions if they feel they are under surveillance.

Let's look at the possible reasons why this happens. One outdated explanation involves the relative status of group members. Status is communicated in many ways—the gender of individuals, the way they dress, the way they walk, the titles that accompany their name. In any newly formed group, leadership roles are most likely assigned to well-dressed, mature men. Because they are assumed to be competent, people are more likely to listen to what they have to say. People of perceived lower status are more likely to keep quiet about their own opinions and to change their views to be more in line with the "higher" status individual. Because of their lowered status in a mixed group, women would not be listened to and would not hold onto their opinions if higher status individuals held opinions inconsistent with theirs.

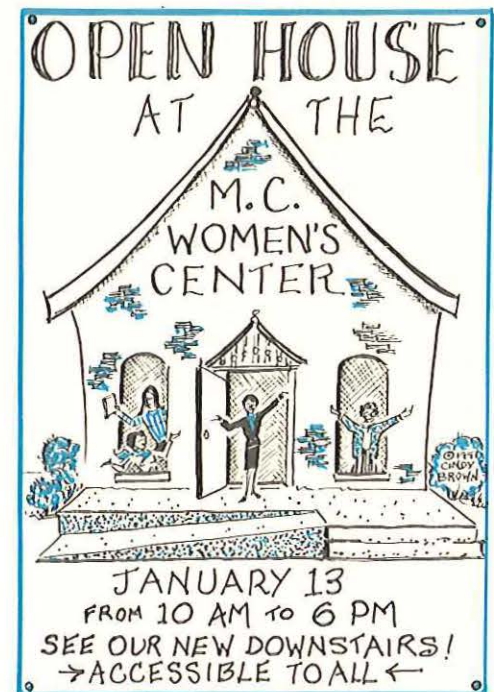
A more contemporary explanation for women's conformity is similarly based on gender expectations but is not related to status. In this explanation, men are expected to be more assertive, independent, task-oriented and instrumental than women; women are expected to be more communal, expressive, selfless, and concerned with others than men. Conformity, in this view, would be a product of women's desire to preserve social harmony and enhance positive self-feelings about group members. Conformity is a means of expressing solidarity and social support with other group members.

How do we get everyone to embrace these explanations for conformity when most people are not consciously aware that women are more conforming in group situations

than men? They do not notice that women do not speak up as much as men in most mixed groups. They do not notice that when women do speak, they are more likely to address the male members of the group even though they might be responding to comments made by a woman. They are not aware that many women feel extremely self-conscious when they volunteer comments or respond to questions in a mixed group situation.

The more positive explanation for women's conformity in groups sets the stage for a dilemma. Do we want to change the public's perceptions of women and its interpretation of women's behavior in groups or do we want to change our group behavior? We like feeling that our group roles

*(continued page four)*

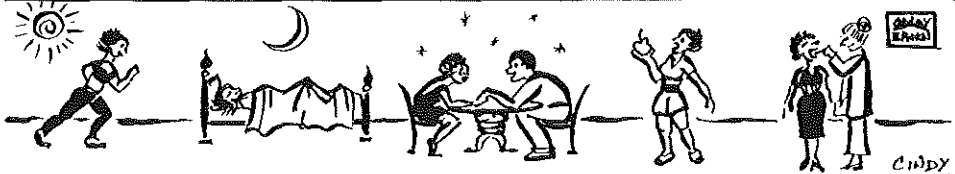


*The Cunninggim Women's Center now occupies both floors of the Franklin Building, West Side Row (behind Tolman Dormitory).*

*You are cordially invited to an Open House on January 13 from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. for a look at our newly expanded center and to enjoy some refreshments. Chancellor Wyatt and others will speak at a brief ceremony beginning at 4:30.*



PHYSICAL FITNESS ♀ REST ♀ SOCIAL SUPPORT ♀ GOOD DIET ♀ SELF CARE ♀ FUN ♀



MEDICAL CARE ♀ SPIRITUALITY ♀ AWARENESS ♀ LOVE ♀ INTELLECTUAL INTERESTS

# Reduce cancer risk with diet, nutrition guidelines

Beth Colvin Huff, RN, MSN  
Associate in OB-GYN

The American Cancer Society (ACS) has recently released their "Guidelines on Diet, Nutrition, and Cancer," and in this season of New Year's resolutions it may be wise to review those and plan for a healthy 1992. The guidelines are based on multiple studies that support these seven recommendations for lowering cancer risk.

1. *Maintain a desirable body weight.* Women weighing 40% above desirable weight have a 55% higher death rate from cancer than women of normal weight. Decreasing total fat and caloric intake and increasing physical activity are the only weight control measures that truly work.

2. *Eat a varied diet.* Eating multiple kinds of food assures a good balance of nutrients.

3. *Include a variety of both vegetables and fruits in the daily diet.* When was the last time you had a rutabaga (good source of vitamin C) or acorn squash (vitamin A) with dinner? How about an apricot (vitamin A) or a pa-

paya (vitamin C and fiber) packed in your lunch bag or for an afternoon snack? Be adventurous!

4. *Eat more high fiber foods.* I know you're tired of hearing this one, but have you tried it? Fiber is found in whole grains (bran, whole wheat breads), fruits, vegetables, and legumes (dried beans, peas). These also tend to be low-fat, low-calorie foods which impact on rates of obesity, heart disease, and diabetes.

5. *Cut down on total fat intake.* Fat calories should make up 25 - 30% of your total calorie intake, but the typical American diet is much higher in fat than that. Look for opportunities to cut down on fatty meats, whole fat dairy products, gravies, sauces, salad dressings, and high fat desserts.

6. *Limit consumption of alcoholic beverages.* You may have already vowed this one after the holidays. Drinking in conjunction with cigarette smoking is particularly high-risk behavior for oral cancers.

7. *Limit consumption of salt-cured, smoked, and nitrite-preserved foods.* These processes are often used in preserving meats and have been associated with cancers of the stomach and esophagus.

The ACS will be happy to provide you with more information on dietary means of lowering your cancer risk.

Have a happy and healthy New Year! ■

Women's VU

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## News quotes

Included in U.S. News and World Report statistics:

### 2017 predicted as year for closing wage gap

Database

Percentage of Americans who believe women have a better life than men:  
1975 28; 1990 22

Percentage of women who say more money would make life better: 60

Highest percentages of women executives:

San Jose, Calif.	19.7
San Francisco	18
Washington, D.C.	17.3

Projected date for closing of the male-female wage gap: 2017

Percentage of women who would lose respect for a husband who stayed home:  
1970 68; 1990 19

U.S. News & World Report  
October 28, 1991

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Calendar  
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Events

Margaret  
Cuninggim  
Women's  
Center



For further information call the Cuninggim Center at 322-4843.

6 (Monday)

**Dissertation Writers Group I reconvenes today 4:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m., Cuninggim Center.**

Facilitators are Nancy Ransom, director of the Cuninggim Center, and Katharyn May, chair of the Department of Family and Health Systems Nursing.

Anyone who is new to the Dissertation Writers Group must turn in an abstract of her dissertation proposal or a statement of where she is in the process of picking a subject and/or writing the proposal.

13 (Monday)

**Open House at the Margaret Cuninggim Center.** The Cuninggim Center now occupies both floors of Franklin, West Side Row (behind Tolman Dormitory). Students, staff, faculty, administrators, and friends are invited to stop by anytime during the day from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. for refreshments and a look at our newly expanded center.

A brief program, to include remarks by Chancellor Wyatt, Sherre Dryden, Chair of the Advisory Board, and Katharyn May, Chair-elect of the Advisory Board, begins at 4:30 p.m.

13 (Monday)

**Book Group** will discuss *A Virtuous Woman* by Kay Gibbons. Facilitator is Leigh Callahan. 5:15 to 6:15 p.m., Sarratt 204. New members welcome.

15 (Wednesday)

**Dissertation Writers Group II reconvenes.** (see January 6) 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., Cuninggim Center.

16 (Thursday)

**Noontime Seminar. *Hannah Penn 1671-1726: America's First Woman Governor?*** led by Alison Duncan Hirsch, assistant professor, history. The second wife of William Penn, Hannah Penn served as acting proprietor of Pennsylvania after he suffered a stroke in 1712 until her death in 1726. She exercised political power equivalent to that of a colonial governor—a position unique among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English or American women. 12:15 to 1:15 p.m., Cuninggim Center.

22 (Wednesday)

**Lunchtime Book Review.** Sally Rhodes Ahner, adjunct artist teacher of voice, Blair School of Music, reviews *Opera, or The Undoing of Women* by Catherine Clement, translated from the French by Betsy Wing. The author explores the relationship between the words and the music and about how women must die in operas, in part because they represent forces opposed to the masculine qualities of order and closure. 12:15 p.m. to 1:15 p.m., Cuninggim Center.

Please save and post. Individual flyers for these programs will not be sent.





## News quotes

### Study finds exercise alone does not prevent bone loss among older women

Contrary to popular belief, moderate exercise alone does not prevent bone loss among older women, according to a study.

The researchers found that combining exercise with low doses of estrogen was the most effective way of preventing bone loss, although a combination of exercise and doses of calcium also slowed bone loss. The women were asked to take two brisk, thirty-minute walks and to attend one hourlong aerobics class a week.

Women begin to lose bone when their bodies reduce production of estrogen after menopause. This reduction of bone mass, or osteoporosis, makes the bones break easily, leading to hip fracture, crushed vertebrae and other painful problems.

Among the women who exercised and took calcium supplements, bone loss nearly stopped. But among those who took estrogen while exercising, bone density increased by about three percent.

*New York Times*  
October 24, 1991

### An increasing preference for boys in Asia dooms girls, demographic research says

Little girls in China no longer have their feet crushed by foot-binding, and widows in India are no longer supposed to be roasted alive on the funeral pyre of their husbands. But a stark statistic testifies to women's continuing unequal status: at least sixty million females in Asia are missing and feared dead, victims of nothing more than their sex. Worldwide, research suggests, the number of missing females may top one million.

If sex discrimination in the West means office harassment or fewer good jobs for women, in the Third World it often means death. A traditional preference for boys translates quickly—in China, India and many other developing countries—into neglect and death for girls. While the discrimination is widely seen as a relic of outdated attitudes, in fact the problem appears to be getting worse in Asia. Recently released census data in China and India show that in both countries the sex ratio of the population became more skewed over the course of the last decade.

*New York Times*  
November 5, 1991

### Family leaves are good for business

Leaves to deal with family needs don't increase costs. They limit employee costs by reducing turnover, absenteeism, and lateness.

An executive at Corning Inc. recently told the Families & Work Institute that the glass company's family-oriented employment policies have resulted in a fifty percent cut in turnover and positive financial performance. Scores of other companies have reported similar results.

*New York Times*  
December 3, 1991

... articles above, as well as others quoted in *Women's VU*, are too long to be reprinted in full. For complete articles, please come by the Cuninggim Center library. Also, there is a bulletin board of current news clippings in the ground floor office.)

### Call for Presentations

The Second International Conference  
on Sexual Assault on Campus  
October 1-3, 1992  
Orlando, Florida

Sponsored by The Safe Schools  
Coalition, The American College  
Personnel Association, and eleven  
other national organizations.

The plenary and breakout sessions, the "sharing fair," and networking opportunities of the Conference will be concurrently addressing:

- efforts to reduce the magnitude of sexual assault
- programs for meeting the needs of victims, and
- legal and enforcement issues concerning campus and governmental policies.

Send a 500 word abstract of proposed presentation by March 1, 1992 to: Dr. Alan McEvoy, Department of Sociology, Box 720, Wittenberg University, Springfield, OH 45501.

### Library (from page four)

gynecologists, animals, and relationships.

*In Stitches: A Patchwork of Feminist Humor and Satire* edited by Gloria Kaufman is an excellent collection of feminist wit. In her introduction Kaufman states that "Feminist humor clarifies vision with the satiric intent of inspiring change. It is therefore essentially hopeful rather than resigned or bitter, as mainstream women's humor often is."

The selections in this fascinating book are arranged by subject, and include short stories, cartoons, song lyrics, poems, and photographs. Some of the contributions are by men, and some date back to the early part of this century, so it is evident that not all feminist humor was written by women in recent years.

Other works in the library on women's humor are *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor & Satire* edited by Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely, and three books of "Sylvia" cartoons by Nicole Hollander. ■



# Announcements

## Campus

### Johnnetta Cole speaks for Martin Luther King, Jr. Lecture Series.

The president of Spelman College, Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole, delivers the keynote address for the Martin Luther King, Jr. Series at 7:30 p.m. in Benton Chapel on Tuesday, January 28. A reception in Branscomb Formal Lounge is in her honor from 3:30 p.m. until 5:00 p.m.

### January home games for VU Women's Basketball:

- Jan. 4, Georgia, 2:00 p.m.
- Jan. 26, Florida, 2:00 p.m.
- Jan. 30, Middle TN State, 7:00 p.m.

**Do you have an extra TV or VCR?** Cuninggim Center has need for a color television monitor and a VCR for library use. If you're upgrading your equipment, perhaps you would like to donate your old TV and VCR for this purpose.

**Cuninggim Library open Tuesday evenings.** Beginning January 14, the library will be open each Tuesday throughout the Spring Semester for study and research.

Cuninggim Center Fax:  
(615) 343-0940.

## Community

**Women Helping Women Through Decisions.** Women volunteers (faculty, staff, and students) are needed for a course in positive decision-making and life-planning skills at the Tennessee Women's Prison. Would you work one-on-one with a prisoner/partner for an hour weekly during the eight week course, February 3 through March 30?

Volunteer training is scheduled for January 25-26. For information, call Kathy Masulis at 383-5823 or Candy Markman at 383-6393.

**Tennessee Woman '92 conference.** U. S. Senator Jim Sasser's office is sponsoring an all day conference for the women of Tennessee on Saturday, February 8. Concurrent workshops will be led by Nashville women and there will be a luncheon with a keynote speaker. Among the speakers will be Mary Sasser and Senator Sasser. For more information call Senator Sasser's Nashville office at 736-7353.

**Career Advancement Scholarship Program** of the Business and Professional Women's Foundation offers scholarships ranging from \$500 - \$1,000 for full-time or part-time programs of study in the fields of computer science, education, paralegal, or science (health care fields are not covered). Scholarships and loans are awarded to help working women upgrade their skills, wages, and job security. Application deadline is April 15. Complete information is available in the Cuninggim Center Library.

**1992-93 Congressional Fellowships on Women and Public Policy** applications are due by February 14. This Women's Research and Education Institute program for graduate students provides recipients an opportunity to be a legislative aide in Washington and train as a potential leader in public policy.

**Celebrating Feminisms and the Diversity of Women** is the Southeastern Women's Studies Association's Sixteenth Annual Conference March 12-15, 1992, University of South Florida, Tampa.

Information is available on the bulletin board at the Cuninggim Center.



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## Women's VU

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- A yearly subscription to off-campus addresses is \$5.00. Please make checks payable to Vanderbilt University.

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