Peer Pressure in The Wave

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Introduction

The Wave, directed by Alexander Grasshoff and based on Ron Jones's classroom experiment, explores how authoritarian behavior can develop through ordinary needs for order, belonging, recognition, and certainty. The film begins when students studying Nazi Germany struggle to understand how so many people could obey a destructive regime or remain silent while persecution intensified. Their teacher, Mr. Ross, attempts to make the problem experiential by creating a classroom movement built on discipline, unity, ritual, and collective identity. The exercise quickly grows beyond its original purpose because students discover that membership offers social rewards as well as academic excitement. The film's importance lies in showing that authoritarianism does not attract followers only through explicit hatred. It can begin with appealing promises of equality, efficiency, strength, and community, especially when dissent becomes socially costly. This makes the story useful for examining peer pressure as well as leadership, propaganda, conformity, and moral responsibility (Grasshoff, 1981; Jones, 1976).

The connection between authoritarianism and peer pressure is especially important because control in the film does not remain entirely vertical. Mr. Ross creates the rules, but students soon begin enforcing them on one another. Membership cards, slogans, coordinated clothing, the salute, and expectations of loyalty turn private judgment into a public test of belonging. A student who questions the movement is no longer merely expressing a different opinion; that student risks being seen as disloyal to friends and to the group. This mechanism connects the film with broader discussions of the positive and negative effects of Peer Pressure. Peer influence can support learning and cooperation, but it becomes dangerous when acceptance depends on suppressing conscience. *The Wave* therefore asks not only why a leader gains authority, but why ordinary followers begin protecting that authority even when no direct command is being issued (Grasshoff, 1981; Strasser, 1981).

Discipline, Belonging, and the Appeal of the Group

The early stages of The Wave are persuasive because they appear beneficial. Students sit more attentively, answer questions efficiently, follow routines, and feel part of a successful class. Discipline itself is not the problem. Schools, athletic teams, workplaces, and communities all depend on shared expectations. The danger emerges when discipline stops serving learning and begins replacing independent thought. The same is true of unity and pride. Unity can support mutual aid, while pride

can strengthen confidence, but both become destructive when insiders are treated as superior and outsiders as threats. The Wave creates conditional equality: members appear equal because they share the same rules and symbols, yet acceptance depends on conformity. Students who hesitate or object are increasingly isolated. This structure reveals why authoritarian movements can feel empowering to some participants. People who previously felt unnoticed suddenly receive identity, status, and recognition, and the emotional benefit of membership can make the loss of independence difficult to see.

Symbols intensify this effect because they compress complex ideas into simple, repeatable actions. The Wave's name, salute, slogan, membership cards, and coordinated behavior allow students to recognize one another instantly and to experience collective identity without debating what the movement actually stands for. Repetition creates familiarity, while rituals generate emotional investment. Communication becomes efficient but less reflective. A slogan can feel true because it is shared, not because evidence has been examined. This distinction separates ethical communication from effective propaganda. The Wave succeeds at mobilizing students precisely because it rewards participation, uses emotional certainty, and suggests that members belong to something larger than the classroom. Once those techniques are established, questioning the movement can feel like an attack on friends rather than an attempt to evaluate ideas. The film therefore demonstrates why persuasion should be judged not only by whether it changes behavior, but also by whether it preserves the audience's capacity to question.

Leadership, Peer Enforcement, and Moral Responsibility

Mr. Ross is a complicated figure because his intention is educational rather than openly authoritarian. He begins the experiment to answer a historical question his students cannot grasp through lecture alone, yet he gradually becomes invested in the authority the exercise gives him. Students respond rapidly to his commands, and that responsiveness can be mistaken for educational success. His professional status matters because students are accustomed to treating a teacher as a legitimate source of direction. The film shows that good intentions do not remove the need for ethical limits. Leadership changes the leader as well as the followers. When people respond enthusiastically to command, a leader may begin interpreting obedience as evidence that the method is working. Mr. Ross delays ending the experiment even after social warning signs appear, illustrating why accountable leadership requires external checks, willingness to hear criticism, and the ability to stop a project when participants are being harmed (Grasshoff, 1981).

Peer pressure makes the movement more powerful because students monitor and recruit one another. The leader no longer needs to observe every interaction once followers begin enforcing the rules themselves. Refusing the salute, criticizing The Wave, or declining membership can threaten friendship and social safety. Silence also becomes significant. A student who privately disagrees but

says nothing may avoid immediate conflict, yet that silence communicates that resistance is weak. This dynamic resembles bullying, discrimination, and other group harms in which bystanders are not the original aggressors but their inaction helps preserve the environment. The film does not imply that every student becomes morally identical. Some participants experience doubt, some resist earlier than others, and some are attracted mainly by belonging. That variation matters because responsibility is distributed across different choices: initiating rules, enforcing them, reporting dissent, remaining silent, and eventually deciding whether to resist.

Resistance, Historical Comparison, and the Ethics of the Experiment

The students who resist The Wave demonstrate that conformity is powerful without being inevitable. Their opposition becomes threatening to the movement because it exposes membership as a choice rather than a natural requirement. Authoritarian groups often respond to criticism by redefining critics as enemies, disloyal insiders, or outsiders whose arguments do not deserve consideration. Resistance therefore requires more than private disagreement. It may involve speaking publicly, documenting behavior, finding allies, and accepting a social cost. The film presents this moral difficulty effectively because the people applying pressure are classmates and a trusted teacher, not strangers. At the same time, the experiment itself raises ethical concerns. Mr. Ross deceives students, intensifies peer conflict, and allows the movement to expand before revealing the lesson. Teaching manipulation through manipulation can produce insight, but it can also produce harm. Contemporary educators examining conformity would need safer methods, clearer boundaries, and stronger protections for participants rather than reproducing the experiment simply because the story became famous.

The final assembly connects the students' behavior with fascist mechanisms by revealing Adolf Hitler after they have expected a national Wave leader. The comparison is powerful because students who believed they would automatically resist dictatorship must confront their own obedience, surveillance, and exclusion. However, the classroom exercise should not be treated as a complete explanation of Nazi Germany or the Holocaust. Nazi rule involved antisemitic ideology, racial law, propaganda institutions, economic and political crises, war, state bureaucracy, imprisonment, dispossession, and industrialized mass murder. A school movement lasting a short period cannot reproduce those structures. Its value is narrower: it demonstrates social-psychological mechanisms through which obedience and conformity can become emotionally rewarding. Used responsibly, the film can introduce questions about authoritarian participation while detailed historical study provides the political, ideological, and institutional context the experiment cannot supply (Jones, 1976; Strasser, 1981).

Modern Relevance

The film remains relevant because group identity and peer enforcement now operate in digital as well as physical spaces. Online communities can create rapid belonging through shared symbols, repeated slogans, hashtags, common enemies, and highly visible reactions to dissent. A person may remain silent because criticism could lead to ridicule, exclusion, or coordinated attack, while algorithms can repeatedly expose users to similar claims and make one viewpoint appear universal. These patterns do not mean every strong group, movement, or online community is authoritarian. Healthy solidarity allows questions, protects the dignity of outsiders, tolerates internal disagreement, and limits leadership power. Warning signs appear when loyalty to the group becomes more important than evidence, leaders become exempt from criticism, outsiders are dehumanized, and harmful behavior is justified as necessary for unity. *The Wave* is therefore useful not because it provides a checklist proving that every intense community is fascist, but because it encourages people to examine how belonging affects their willingness to think independently.

Conclusion

The Wave demonstrates that authoritarianism grows through relationships as well as commands. Mr. Ross introduces discipline, unity, ritual, and collective identity to help students understand why people may comply with dictatorship, but the exercise becomes dangerous when efficiency and belonging begin to replace individual judgment. Students reinforce the movement through recruitment, surveillance, peer pressure, and hostility toward dissent, showing that followers can become active participants in sustaining power. The final revelation forces them to recognize mechanisms they had assumed belonged only to distant history. The film should not be treated as an equivalent of Nazi Germany or as a complete account of the Holocaust, but it offers a useful study of conformity and social influence. Its strongest lesson is that moral courage requires examining one's own group, not merely condemning obvious outsiders. Unity can be valuable, but it becomes dangerous when membership demands obedience, silences criticism, and makes exclusion feel like loyalty (Grasshoff, 1981; Jones, 1976).

References

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