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## MODULE 57

# Social Influence

### Module Preview

Research on social influence indicates that behavior is contagious. When we are unsure about our judgments, we are likely to adjust them toward the group standard. Sometimes, social influences are even strong enough to make people conform to falsehoods or capitulate to cruelty.

The presence of others can arouse individuals, boosting their performance on easy tasks but hindering it on difficult ones. When people pool their efforts toward a group goal, individuals may free-ride on others' efforts. Sometimes, group experiences arouse people and make them anonymous, and thus less self-aware and self-restrained. Within groups, discussions can enhance members' prevailing attitudes and produce groupthink. A minority committed to a position can, however, influence a majority.

### Module Guide

#### Conformity and Obedience

- ▶ Lectures: Mimicry and Prosocial Behavior; Social Exclusion and Mimicry; The Seattle Windshield Pitting Epidemic
- ▶ Exercises: Suggestibility; Social Influence
- ▶ Project: Violating a Social Norm
- ▶ Videos: Module 33 of *Psychology: The Human Experience: Conformity*; Segment 29 of the Scientific American Frontiers Series, 2nd ed.: *Superpower Ping-Pong*
- ▶ Instructor Video Tool Kit: *Liking and Imitation: The Sincerest Form of Flattery*

- 57-1. Describe the chameleon effect, and discuss Asch's experiments on conformity, noting the difference between normative and informational social influence.

The *chameleon effect* refers to our natural tendency to mimic others. Unconsciously mimicking others' expressions, postures, and voice tones helps us feel what they are feeling. This helps explain why we feel happier around happy people and why research has revealed a *mood linkage*, a sharing of ups and downs. Research participants in an experiment tend to rub their own face when confederates rub their face; similarly, the participants shake their own foot when they are with a foot-shaking person. The most empathic people mimic and are liked the most.

**Conformity** is adjusting our behavior or thinking toward some group standard. Solomon Asch found that under certain conditions, people will conform to a group's judgment, even when it is clearly incorrect. Experiments indicate that conformity increases when we feel incompetent or insecure, admire the group's status and attractiveness, have made no prior commitment to a response, are being observed by other group members, come from a culture that encourages

respect for social standards, and are in a group with at least three people who are unanimous in their judgment.

We are sensitive to social norms and so we sometimes conform to gain social approval (**normative social influence**). At other times, we accept information about reality provided by the group (**informational social influence**).

- ▶ Lecture: Obedience in Everyday Life
- ▶ Exercises: Obedience and Conformity; Would You Obey?; Wolves or Sheep?
- ▶ Exercise/Project: Applying Research on Conformity, Obedience, and Role-Playing
- ▶ Videos: Module 34 of *Psychology: The Human Experience: Obedience: The Milgram Study*; Video Clip 41 of *Digital Media Archive: Psychology*, 1st ed.: *Milgram's Obedience Studies*
- ▶ Instructor Video Tool Kit: *Obedience and Authority: A Laboratory Demonstration*

- 57-2. Describe Milgram's experiments on obedience, and explain how the conformity and obedience studies can help us understand our susceptibility to social influence.

In the Milgram studies, the experimenter ordered “teachers” to deliver shocks to a “learner” for wrong answers. Torn between obeying the experimenter and responding to the learner’s pleas, the people usually chose to obey orders, even though it supposedly meant harming the learner. Obedience was highest when the person giving the orders was close at hand and was perceived to be a legitimate authority, when the authority figure was supported by a prestigious institution, when the victim was depersonalized or at a distance, and when there were no role models for defiance.

The experiments demonstrate that social influences can be strong enough to make people conform to falsehoods or capitulate to cruelty. The studies, because of their design, also illustrate how great evil sometimes grows out of people’s compliance with lesser evils. Evil does not require monstrous characters but ordinary people corrupted by an evil situation. By understanding the processes that shape our behavior, we may be less susceptible to external social pressures in real-life situations that lead us to violate our own internal standards.

## Group Influence

- ▶ Lecture: Deviance in the Dark
- ▶ Exercise: Deindividuation
- ▶ Video: Video Clip 42 of *Digital Media Archive: Psychology*, 1st ed.: *Schachter's Affiliation Experiment*
- ▶ Feature Films: *Lord of the Flies* and *Deindividuation*

- 57-3. Describe the conditions in which the presence of others is likely to result in social facilitation, social loafing, or deindividuation.

Experiments on **social facilitation** reveal that the presence of observers can arouse individuals, strengthening the most likely response and so boosting their performance on easy or well-learned tasks but hindering it on difficult or newly learned ones. When people pool their efforts toward a group goal, **social loafing** may occur as individuals exert less effort. When a group experience arouses people and makes them anonymous, they become less self-aware and self-restrained, a psychological state known as **deindividuation**.

- ▶ Lectures: Understanding Terrorism; Groupthink
- ▶ Exercises: Group Polarization; The Wisdom of Crowds
- ▶ Video: Module 2 of *Psychology: The Human Experience: Group Decision-Making*
- ▶ Feature Film: *Twelve Angry Men*
- ▶ Instructor Video Tool Kit: *The Wisdom of Groups*

- 57-4. Discuss how group interaction can facilitate group polarization and groupthink.

Within groups, discussions among like-minded members often produce **group polarization**, an enhancement of the group’s prevailing tendencies. Group polarization can have beneficial results, as when it reinforces the resolve of those in a self-help group. But it can also have dire conse-

quences, as it can strengthen a terrorist mentality. Sometimes, group interaction distorts important decisions. In *groupthink*, the desire for harmony overrides a realistic appraisal of alternatives.

### The Power of Individuals

57-5. *Identify the characteristic common to minority positions that successfully sway majorities.*

It is important to remember that *social control* and *personal control* interact. A minority that consistently holds to its position can sway the majority. This is especially true if the minority's self-confidence stimulates others to consider why the minority reacts as it does. Even when a minority's influence is not yet visible, it may be convincing members of the majority to rethink their views.