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The Effect of Others

By Exploratorium
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This article explains the effect that people can have on others. This concept is called social influence. The author discusses many different forms of social influence that affect human behavior. As you read, take notes on the different forms of social influence.

We spend our lives watching and responding to each other.

- [1] Spend time in any public space watching the crowds and you'll see examples of what scientists call social influence — the varied ways people change their behavior because of the presence of others. Notice how individuals respond to orders and requests, go along with a group, mirror the actions of others, compete, and cooperate. We are finely tuned to the people around us, relying on each other for cues about how to behave so that we can efficiently navigate our social environments. The influence of others is so pervasive that we can experience it even when there is no real person there: we'll adjust our behavior in response to an implied presence (say, a security camera and a No Trespassing sign) or an imagined one ("What would my mother say?").



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SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Conformity

You've almost certainly experienced it: unsure what to do in a situation, you look around to see what others are doing, and change your behavior to match.

Most of us don't like to be called conformists (at least in Western societies, where individuality and uniqueness are prized), but going along with the crowd is a natural and often useful tendency. Humans evolved to live in groups; since early on, we've needed ways to smooth interactions, reduce conflict, and coordinate action. For example, traffic flows better — and more safely — if cars all drive in the same direction and pedestrians all cross the street together. Conforming to the group can be a matter of survival.

The tendency to conform has two different roots. Sometimes, in confusing situations, we assume that other people know more than we do, so we follow their lead. That assumption might be right — but often it's not. Say you're walking by a building and see smoke coming out. Do you call 911? If other people look unconcerned, you might decide it's not an emergency. But others may decide not to phone for help because you don't look concerned. Scientists call this potential misinterpretation by a group pluralistic ignorance. It can lead to the

bystander effect, where no one from a crowd steps forward to help in a situation where action is needed. It's a paradox: the more people who witness an emergency, the less chance that any of them will act, because they're all conforming to the group's behavior.

- [5] The other reason people conform and go along with the crowd is that we all want to be liked and accepted. The desire to fit in is so strong that people sometimes conform to a group consensus even when it goes against their own judgment — at least in public. In private, they're much more likely to follow their own minds.

Compliance

When the pressure from others gets more explicit, conformity blends into another type of social influence: compliance, when we respond to a direct request made by someone else.

Social scientists have identified various compliance strategies, and you may be using some of them — or have been the target of them — without being aware of it. For example, if someone asks for a very small favor ("Can you tell me how to get to the library?"), and you comply, you're more likely to agree with a second, larger request ("Oh no, that's farther away than I thought — can you spare two bucks for the bus?"). This is called the foot-in-the-door technique. It works because complying with the first request shapes or reinforces our self-image ("I'm a helpful person!"), providing us with a rationale for agreeing to the second request ("That's who I am — I help out when needed.").

Obedience

When pressure from others gets even stronger, it can lead to obedience — when we respond to a demand issued by an authority figure. The world is full of orders given by people who have power over us, either in person (the boss, a cop, your parent) or via written words (as on road signs). The pressure to conform in such situations can be extreme, and obedience can have a dark side. In one famous experiment, a researcher set up a situation where subjects had to decide whether to follow orders to inflict¹ pain on another person. The disturbing results showed how hard it is for people to resist authority.

This experiment was done decades ago, in a different social time. Would today's generation, supposedly more critical and less trusting of authority, respond the same way? Scientists recently ran a modified version of the study. The test subjects reacted similarly, confirming the powerful role of social influence.

PEOPLE IN GROUPS

Social loafing

- [10] Social influence also plays an important role when people work in groups. Much of this influence is direct or intentional — for example, we often work harder because our co-workers are depending on us to meet a deadline. But sometimes the mere presence of others can shape our behavior: As work groups grow larger,

1. **Inflict** (*verb*) to cause

individual group members tend to decrease the effort they put in, especially when their individual contribution can't be identified. This tendency is called social loafing. One of the first people to study social loafing was a French agricultural engineer who noticed that adding more farm workers to a job didn't increase productivity as much as expected. In the early 1900s, he ran a series of simple experiments, having men pull carts either alone or together. In theory, two men should pull twice as much weight as a single man (200%). Instead, he found that together they pulled only 186% of the weight — each man pulled less than he had alone. The more men on the job, the less each one pulled individually.

This tendency has been documented many times since, in various situations. It's affected somewhat by culture and circumstance — for example, workers from societies where interdependence² is the norm tend to loaf less than those from more individualistic cultures — but it's still universal. Does this mean that people are slackers? Not necessarily. When many hands are making light work, it's reasonable to ease up a bit — as long as things are kept fair and everyone reduces their effort by the same amount. And there's a certain logic to holding back if you believe your contribution isn't important, or if it can't be seen and recognized.

But when only some people loaf, the whole group suffers and its chances of success decrease. Voting in elections is one example. There are many reasons why people don't vote, but social loafing can contribute to the problem. If you think that enough other people will vote and that the outcome will be fine without your participation, or that your vote doesn't really matter, that might be enough to keep you away from the polls.

Given the potential problems with social loafing, how can we limit it? Social scientists have identified several effective strategies:

- Make personal efforts identifiable
- Ensure each person feels their effort is important
- Highlight that personal efforts will improve group performance
- Increase team spirit

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2. **Interdependence** (*noun*) the act of relying on others