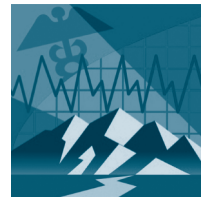**CHAPTER 5**

Social Processes That Influence Human Behavior

Read This Chapter to Learn About

➤ How Groups Affect Individuals

➤ Culture

➤ Socialization

HOW GROUPS AFFECT INDIVIDUALS

Humans are by nature socially oriented. The presence of others often affects how humans behave. The type of group situation (e.g., workplace), the number of people in the group (e.g., few versus many), and the individual's relationship to those in the group (e.g., strangers versus familiar people) all can consciously or unconsciously affect how individuals react.

Groups can create changes in the amount of effort an individual puts into a task. If the task is easy, performing it in a group increases the effort a person puts into completing a task. With simple tasks (e.g., single-digit math problems on a timed test), the individual performs tasks faster and more accurately in a group situation (**social facilitation**). However, if the task is more complicated, this often leads to **social loafing**, where the individual reduces his or her efforts on the assumption that other members of the group will step up to complete the task. (Anyone who has completed a group project in school has probably witnessed this effect firsthand.)

Even in critical situations such as an emergency, the presence of a large group will often cause individuals to delay stepping forward to help. This phenomenon is termed the **bystander effect**. Thus if you have an emergency, it is better to have only one or two people nearby to help rather than a crowd. With a crowd, you are likely to get a slower response because there is a **diffusion of responsibility** across the people in the crowd. The bystander effect often has to be drummed out of medical students early in their training, because in an emergency, the initial reaction is to stay back if there are others around.

The group can also alter how people view themselves. The larger the group, the greater the **deindividuation**, and the more likely an individual is to comply with the group and lose his or her inhibitions regarding participating in the group's activities. Large groups increase the feeling of anonymity and expand the diffusion of responsibility, making individuals less likely to consider the moral or long-term consequences of the group activities in which they participate. This phenomenon can be seen, for example, when individuals who would not normally behave in an antisocial way suddenly damage property, injure other people, and set cars on fire when they join fans rioting after a football team loses.

CULTURE

The definition of **culture** includes the customs, values, beliefs, and behavioral norms that are shared among a community and passed down to the next generation. Culture can play a major role in human responses, and multiple cultures may influence an individual at the same time. Culture, both singular and multiple, definitely affects human behavior, but which values are emphasized and how culture is expressed may differ from individual to individual. The culture into which a child is born is the **culture of origin** (e.g., natal family culture). For some multicultural individuals this may be a combination of two cultures (mother's natal culture + father's natal culture). The second type is **a culture of assimilation**, which is a culture that an individual immigrates to and consciously or unconsciously picks up (e.g. the new culture's language, values, and behavioral norms). Assimilation of this type is often a two-way street. Immigrants who assimilate into a dominant culture bring with them ideas, language, religious beliefs, and culinary choices that effectively leave their mark on the dominant culture as well. In a **culture of accommodation**, an individual understands and lives in a culture different from his or her own, but does not endorse the values and cultural norms of that culture. Finally, a **culture of adoption** is one intentionally chosen by an adult who consciously adopts those cultural norms and integrates into the lifestyle of the chosen culture.

The culture of origin affects how an individual initially views him- or herself and can have a lifelong effect on concepts such as self-worth and self-identity. Even if the

individual later intentionally disengages from the natal culture, that culture remains the identity that the individual is rejecting; it is the stable cultural point that the individual is using as a reference for self-differentiation.

SOCIALIZATION

Cultural norms, values, and beliefs can be taught explicitly or implicitly. **Socialization** describes the process of disseminating and adopting cultural norms. There are multiple agents of socialization. The earliest is parental and family influence. As an individual ages, his or her peers and the media take a more active role in socialization. As the individual ages further, the choice of profession and workplace takes on a large role in socialization; the profession offers a specific set of behavioral norms and values. Actions taken within socially accepted norms are subtly (and sometimes more obviously) rewarded, encouraging the individual to continue to act and behave in a way that aligns with the group's social norms.

In addition to socialization, there are a number of other group-focused factors that may affect an individual's attitude and behaviors. **Conformity** to a group due to social pressures may cause an individual to adjust both internal attitudes and external behaviors. Solomon Asch performed a famous series of research studies that has shown that conformity (or peer pressure) can actually cause someone to change a correct answer on a task to a blatantly incorrect answer in order to conform to group norms (see Figure 5-1).
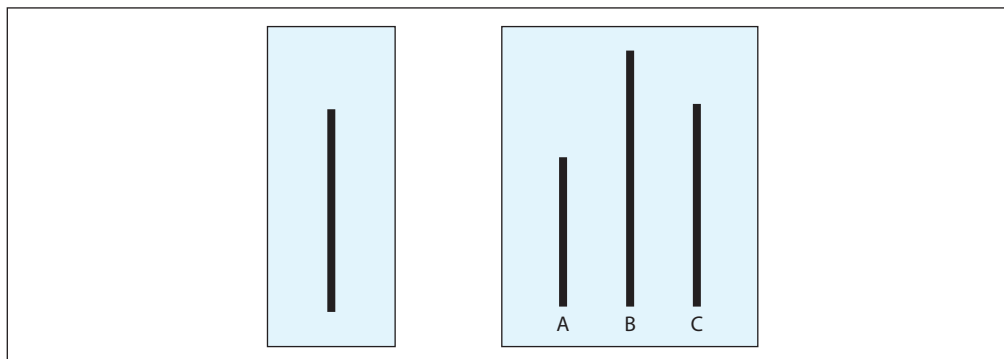

FIGURE 5-1 Solomon Asch's research study. Individuals were asked to match the length of the specimen line to one of the three next to it.

In his study he had individuals state whether lines were the same length or different lengths. When individuals performed the task alone, they had no difficulty identifying the correct answer. However, when there was one participant in a group with three confederates who chose the incorrect answer, the participant would change his or her

answer to an obviously incorrect answer to conform to the group's response. The desire for the group to agree, even in the face of incorrect information, is also known as **group think**.

Groups can change how people solve problems and develop opinions. **Group polarization** is the process by which individuals in groups are likely to form opinions that are more extreme than those they would develop if they were considering the problem or opinion alone. This phenomenon can be viewed on a large scale in political rallies or on a small scale in class discussions. In both situations it has been observed that individuals leaving those group events are likely to espouse more extreme opinions than those they had prior to attending.

Deviance

People who deviate from social and cultural norms can feel out of step with those around them. **Deviance** can be either a form of individual expression or a type of antisocial behavior. Some psychologists recognize the concept of **positive deviance**, in which individuals break social rules in response to positive moral or values reasoning (e.g., a whistle-blower at a company that is dumping toxic waste into the city water supply). However, it is not uncommon for social deviants (even positive deviants) to experience punishment by the group in the form of social isolation, financial penalties, or other hardships.

Obedience

Another important factor in relationships between individuals and groups is **obedience**. In a classic series of studies in the 1950s through the 1970s, the American social psychologist Stanley Milgram showed just how far someone may go to obey authority regardless of personal beliefs about the correctness or morality of an action. In the study, Milgram placed a study participant on one side of a glass window and another person on the other side. The person on the other side of the glass was fitted with "electrodes" that appeared to deliver an electric shock. (In fact, of course, the electrodes were fake and the person wearing them was a research confederate.) The study participant was given an electric switch supposedly attached to the electrodes and told to punish the other person with increasingly powerful shocks (up to "XXX DEATH") every time that person answered a math question incorrectly. A surprising number of study participants obeyed the commands of the researcher to deliver electric shocks, even when they knew the shocks could or would harm the other individual. It should be noted that this study would not be allowed in modern times due to the extreme negative mental health impact on participants, and in fact it was one of the studies

used to mandate the implementation of university institutional review boards (IRBs) to oversee research ethics.

There are certainly cultural influences on how far someone will go to obey authority. Even today, cultural obedience to authority has been implicated in tragedies ranging from airplane crashes to military actions. In general, while the United States has become a more individualistic society since the 1940s, the powerful influence of authority does not appear to have changed as much as people might have thought. Obedience can be reinforced further in some hierarchical professions.

Situational or **social power** can also have a surprisingly strong influence on attitudes and behaviors. In the Stanford prison experiment in the 1970s, Philip Zimbardo divided ordinary college students into two groups, the "guards" and the "prisoners." By the end of the study, the guards were abusing the prisoners, even developing punishments not specified in the study. Thus even typical, educated young adults can quickly change attitudes and behaviors to conform to the situations, and those changes can lead to surprisingly cruel behaviors.