

FOCUS ON VOCABULARY AND LANGUAGE

Social Thinking

The Fundamental Attribution Error

A partner must decide whether a loved one's *tart-tongued remark* reflects a *bad day* or a *mean disposition*. How we make attributions can have serious consequences (*real-life effects*). Couples must decide whether their partner's sarcastic or unkind comment (*tart-tongued remark*) was due to a cruel personality (*a mean disposition*) or the result of some situational influence, such as a stressful day at work (*a bad day*).

. . . *freeloaders* . . . This term refers to people who voluntarily live off other people. Those who believe that people are poor and/or unemployed because of personal dispositions tend to underestimate the influence of situational variables. Thus, they might call someone on welfare a *freeloader* rather than simply a victim of circumstances.

Attitudes and Actions

People also come to believe in what they have stood up for. Not only do people support (*stand up for*) their strong convictions by taking appropriate action, but they will also develop convictions about things that they have taken action in support of (*that they have stood up for*). Many lines (*streams*) of evidence confirm the principle that beliefs can be changed to correspond with people's actions (*attitudes follow behavior*).

. . . "*brainwashed*" . . . This refers to a person's beliefs, values, and **attitudes** being changed by relentless indoctrination and mental torture. One part of this mind-changing process involves use of the **foot-in-the-door phenomenon**, whereby a person is first coaxed into agreeing to a small request, and later into agreeing to much greater requests. Frequently, people will change their attitudes to be consistent with their new behavior (*doing becomes believing*).

After this "foot-in-the-door" step, he stood guard inside. Someone who sells products by going from house to house—a door-to-door salesperson—might be able to talk about the product a little bit longer if he puts his foot in the doorway and prevents the resident from closing the door in his face. "Getting your foot in the door" therefore means that you get a chance to compete, or get heard, or do whatever it is you are attempting to do. When researchers convinced people to commit to a small favor (*when they got a foot in the door*) those people were much more likely to agree to a larger request. This is called the *foot-in-the-door phenomenon*. In real life, this approach was used to gradually train people to assume the **role** of torturer (*it eased men into their roles*). After standing guard outside the torturer chamber (the initial "*foot-in-the-door*" step), the trainee was asked to come into the interrogation room; then, he was led to more and more involvement in the actual questioning and torture. As Myers notes, what we do, we gradually become.

The attitudes-follow-behavior principle has a *heartening implication*. When our attitudes and behaviors are inconsistent, we feel a certain amount of tension (**cognitive dissonance**), which makes us want to do something to reduce this uncomfortable state. Thus, if we are feeling depressed (*down in the dumps*) and we behave in a more outgoing manner, talk in a more positive way, reduce self-criticism (*use fewer self-put-downs*), and *act* as though we are happy, we may in fact start feeling much better. As Myers notes, the feelings-follow-actions notion can have a positive effect (a *heartening implication*).

Social Influence

Conformity and Obedience

Fish swim in schools. Birds fly in flocks. Many animals live and travel in groups. For example, fish form groups (*they swim in schools*) and so do birds (*they fly in flocks*). Humans are similar in many ways (*we are social animals*). Often, without conscious awareness, we imitate and copy the actions, emotional and verbal expressions, and attitudes of other members of our reference group (*we are natural mimics*). In this way, behavioral patterns that tend to be automatically transmitted from one person to another (*behavior is contagious*). This phenomenon is called the *chameleon effect* and it helps us to empathize—to feel what others feel.

When people conform to influences that support what we approve, *we applaud them for being “open-minded” and “sensitive” enough to be “responsive.”* We can be influenced by others because they provide useful knowledge or because we want them to view us favorably and not ignore us. **Conformity** that is consistent with what we believe to be true will be seen in a positive light (the conformists are “*open-minded,*” “*sensitive,*” etc.). When conformity influences people to *oppose* what we approve of, we disparage (*scorn*) them for their lack of insight and ready submissiveness (*their “blind, thoughtless willingness” to give in to others’ wishes*).

Professor Milgram’s assistant asks you and another person to *draw slips from a hat* to see who will be the “*teacher*” and who will be the “*learner.*” In Milgram’s famous obedience experiments, participants were deceived into believing they were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (“*teacher*” or “*learner*”) by picking a piece of paper out of a container (*drawing slips from a hat*). In reality, all the participants were actually “*teachers*” who were asked to “shock” the “*learners*” whenever they made mistakes on a memory task. A majority of the participants complied with the experimenter’s request.

You draw back, but the experimenter *prods* you. “Please continue—the experiment requires that you continue.” If you were a participant (“*teacher*”) in Milgram’s experiment, the research assistant would pressure (*prod*) you to carry on with the experiment even though you might show great reluctance (*you draw back*) after hearing the “*learner’s*” cries of distress at being “shocked.”

With kindness and obedience on a collision course, obedience usually won. Milgram’s research on obedience showed that social factors that foster conformity are powerful enough to make almost any one of us behave in ways inconsistent with our beliefs. When people were in conflict over (*torn between*) whether to refuse to harm an individual or to follow orders (*with kindness and obedience on a collision course*), they usually did what they were asked to do (*obedience usually won*).

Cruelty does not require devilish villains. All it takes is ordinary people corrupted by an evil situation. We tend to think that pain and suffering (*cruelty*) are always caused by inhumane and cruel people (*devilish villains*). But social psychology research shows that almost anyone (*ordinary people*) can be led to behave badly given the right (or wrong) circumstances (*can be corrupted by an evil situation*).

Much as water dissolves salt but not sand, so *rotten situations turn some people into bad apples* while others resist (Johnson, 2007). It has been said that one bad apple in a barrel of good apples can turn them all rotten—that someone who is a “*bad apple*” has a corrupting influence on others. Circumstances (*the power of the situation* or *social control*) interact with the power of the individual (*personal control*). Sometimes unpleasant or nasty predicaments (*rotten situations*) lead people to behave in unacceptable or unethical ways (*they turn them into bad apples*), but other people in similar circumstances are able to resist and do the opposite to what is expected.

When you are the minority, you are far more likely to *sway* the majority if you hold firmly to your position and don't *waffle*. Committed individuals and small groups of individuals can convince (*sway*) the majority to their point of view if they adhere strictly to their agenda and do not appear to be uncertain or unsure (*to waffle*).

Group Influence

In a team tug-of-war, do people exert more than, less than, or the same amount of effort as in a one-on-one tug-of-war? In a game in which opponents pull on each end of a rope (*tug-of-war*), when two individuals compete (*one-on-one*), they work much harder (*exert more effort*) than if they were members of a group competing on the same task. This lowering of individual effort when part of a team is called **social loafing**. Note: The term *to loaf* means to work less hard (*slack off*) or to take it easy (*free-ride*).

Thinking Critically About: The Internet as Social Amplifier

I cut my eye teeth in social psychology with experiments on *group polarization*—the tendency for face-to-face discussion to *amplify* group members' preexisting opinions. The expression "*to cut one's eye teeth*" means to acquire knowledge or gain awareness of something new. Myers' career in social psychology began with research in the area of **group polarization** (*he cut his eye teeth in social psychology* in this area). At that time, he did not realize the powerful influence (both good and bad) that the social networking aspects of the Internet would have on the tendency for *virtual discussion* to intensify (*amplify*) group member's preexisting opinions (*group polarization*).

Social Relations

Prejudice

In one 1970s study, most White participants who saw a White man shoving a Black man said they were "*horsing around*." **Prejudices** involve beliefs, emotions, and tendencies to behave in certain ways. They are a form of prejudgment that influences (*colors*) how we interpret what we see. Thus, in an experiment in which White people saw a White man pushing a Black man, most interpreted the behavior as playful activity ("*horsing around*"). When the roles were reversed, the behavior was more likely to be described as aggressive or hostile ("*violent*"). Our perceptions affect what we pay attention to and how we explain or make sense of events.

(Close-Up: Automatic Prejudice) Sometimes that processing is *explicit*—*on the radar screen of our awareness*. More often, it is *implicit*—*below the radar, out of sight*. Some thoughts are processed at a conscious, aware level (*on the radar screen of our awareness*), but more frequently they are unconsciously processed (*below the radar, out of sight*). These *implicit* responses appear to be reflexive in much the same way your knee responds to a tap with a quick, automatic movement (a *knee-jerk response*). Similarly, *prejudice* is often an automatic, unthinking attitude rather than a conscious decision.

Even forming us-them groups *by tossing a coin* creates this bias. One of the factors affecting prejudice is our propensity to define ourselves through identification with a particular group (our **ingroup bias**); this in turn creates an **outgroup** consisting of those who do not belong to our group. Even if the groups are artificially created by random assignment (*by tossing a coin*), we will tend to see our own group as more deserving, superior, and so on.

Prejudice springs not only from the divisions of society but also *from the passions of the heart*. Prejudice can arise from emotions we experience and feel deeply (*from the passions of the heart*), as well as from societal circumstances. When things go wrong, we may feel anger, frustration, or aggression and these feelings are often directed at those who are perceived as responsible (**scapegoat theory**). For example, negative **stereotypes** about particular ethnic groups developed rapidly (*blossomed*) after the events of 9/11, and some very angry (*outraged*) people violently attacked (*lashed out*) at innocent members of these groups. Even ten years later, anti-Muslim hostilities (*animosities*) still erupted (*flared*), with mosque burnings and efforts to block an Islamic community center near the site where the World Trade towers once stood (*Ground Zero*).

Aggression

For a gun to fire, the trigger must be pulled. With some people, as with *hair-trigger guns*, *it doesn't take much to trip an explosion*. A gun that can be fired with very gentle pressure on the trigger is called a *hair-trigger gun*. Some people tend to react with a sudden outburst of anger or hostility (*an explosion*) to even mild provocation, much as a *hair-trigger gun* will fire easily with a small amount of pressure on the trigger (*it doesn't take much to trip an explosion*).

A raging bull will become a gentle *Ferdinand* when castration reduces its testosterone level. Biological explanations of **aggression** examine the influences of genes, clusters of neurons in the brain, and biochemical agents in the blood, such as hormones and alcohol. Levels of the male sex hormone can be reduced by castration; thus, an aggressive, ferocious bull can be reduced to a playful, friendly animal similar to the fictional character (*Ferdinand*) of children's stories.

Sexual scripts depicted in X-rated films are often toxic. Movies that are restricted to adult viewers by censors because of their explicit sexual or violent content are called X-rated films. (R-rated slasher films are similarly restricted because of their gory content.) Repeatedly viewing such media can influence people to think and act in unacceptable and harmful ways. The culturally sanctioned and proscribed ways to behave (**social scripts**) that are depicted in X-rated films and other similar media are called *sexual scripts*. Such scripts can poison and distort the way people think (*X-rated films are often toxic*).

Contrary to much popular opinion, viewing such scenes does not provide *an outlet* for *bottled-up impulses*. Laboratory studies have demonstrated that watching media that show sexual violence against women does not decrease the acceptance and performance of aggression against females. In contrast to what many believe, such scenes do not allow vicarious expression (*an outlet*) for pent-up hostile urges (*bottled-up impulses*) and may instead have the opposite effect. As Myers points out, we do not feel better when we openly express (*vent*) our emotions and display anger and hostility (*"blow off steam"*).

Attraction

So, within certain limits, *familiarity breeds fondness*. Under some circumstances, the more often we see (*become familiar with*) someone, the more likely it is that we will grow to like (*become fond of*) that person. This is called the **mere exposure effect**. This effect suggests that the popular saying "familiarity breeds contempt" may not be completely accurate.

If so, *gut-level prejudice* against those who are culturally different could be a primitive, automatic emotional response (Devine, 1995). Evolution may have programmed (*hard-wired*) our brains with the tendency to feel close connections to (*bond with*) those who are familiar to us, and to be cautious and suspicious (*wary*) of those who are not familiar to us. Thus, inner, visceral, and automatic

feelings of animosity (*gut-level prejudices*) may be primitive emotional reactions (*knee-jerk responses*). But Myers points out that our inner feelings and automatic reactions are not the important thing. Rather, it is what we do with them that really matters.

. . . “*beauty is only skin deep*” . . . This saying suggests that physical attractiveness (*beauty*) is only a superficial quality (*skin deep*). Research, however, has shown that how we look influences social interactions, how frequently we date, our popularity, how we are perceived by others, etc.

. . . *blind date* . . . When a social outing (a *date*) is arranged with a person you have never met or seen before, the meeting or get-together with that person is called a *blind date*. The person you go out with is also called your *blind date*. In an experiment, students were randomly matched in male and female pairs. These pairs then attended a dance, where they talked and danced for more than two hours with their new partners (their *blind dates*). When they later appraised or evaluated their partners (*rated their dates*), the main factor that determined whether they liked each other was physical attractiveness. Both males and females liked good-looking *dates* best.

Moreover, beauty is in the eye of the culture. The old saying that beauty is in the eye of the beholder suggests that our subjective perceptions are more important than objective measures in determining who is physically attractive and who is not. These perceptions are influenced by cultural values or ideals that change over time (*beauty is in the eye of the culture*). In the United States, for example, the full figured movie star idol of the 1950s (*the soft, voluptuous Marilyn Monroe ideal*) has given way to the more fit and athletic, yet large-breasted (*busty*), celebrities of today.

In real life, *birds that flock together usually are of a feather*. The expression “birds of a feather flock together” implies that those who share attitudes, beliefs, interests, religion, economic status, intelligence, and such will tend to associate with each other. Similarity, proximity and perceived attractiveness influence who we like and who likes us.

To be *revved up* and to associate some of that arousal with a desirable person is *to feel the pull of passion*. Research has shown that one part of romantic or **passionate love** is physiological arousal; a second aspect is some cognitive interpretation and labeling of that feeling. So, if a person is in an aroused state (*revved up*), and if that state is easily linked to the presence of an attractive person, attributions of romantic love may be made (*you feel the pull of passion*). As Myers cheerfully notes, rather than absence, *adrenaline makes the heart grow fonder* (intensifies love).

Altruism

At each step, the presence of others *can turn people away from the path that leads to helping*. Darley and Latané displayed their findings in a flow diagram (see Figure 14.8). At each decision point (i.e., noticing the event, interpreting it as an emergency, assuming responsibility), the presence of others who appear to have observed the event (*bystanders*) causes people to be less likely to give assistance to someone in need (*they are turned away from the path that leads to helping*).

Conflict and Peacemaking

Psychologists have noticed a curious tendency: People in conflict form *evil images* of one another. We have a propensity to perceive our enemies in a very distorted manner, often categorizing them as cruel, untrustworthy, and malevolent (*evil*). They, of course, view us in the same way and each party in the **conflict** tends to perceive wicked, diabolical, or devilish intentions in the opponent (*each sees a demon in the other*). The biased pictures we form of each other are called **mirror-image perceptions**.

Before long, each group became intensely proud of itself and hostile to the other group's "*sneaky*," "*smart-alecky stinkers*." In Sherif's experiment, competitive conditions were created to foster the formation of two antagonistic groups. Each group soon saw itself as superior to the other group's "dishonest and sly" ("*sneaky*") "rotten know-it-alls" ("*smart-alecky stinkers*"). Sherif then used shared objectives and common problems (**superordinate goals**) to create reconciliation and cooperation.