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SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND COMMUNICATION IN THE NEW SCENARIOS OF THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

IS IT POSSIBLE TO CHANGE RISK BEHAVIOUR?

SCIENTIFIC DIDACTIC MATERIAL

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The Social Psychology of Social Influence

- - A historical perspective

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In its broadest meaning, social influence deals with the effects that people have on one another. When one begins to specify the social sources of these effects and the variety of the effects in terms of behavior, cognition, and emotion, the field of inquiry that is mapped covers much of what we define as the discipline of social psychology. For a meaningful discussion, therefore, it is necessary to narrow our focus. In this paper we will concentrate mainly on a body of experimental research about the sources and limits of social influence, including studies of conformity, compliance, majority and minority influence, obedience, and related phenomena. The particular work to be examined is a line of research that began in the mid-1930s, flourished in the post World War II period, and became moribund before the 1980s. The area of research is no longer pursued programmatically, not because the questions posed by the experiments were definitively answered, nor because the confirmed hypotheses are what we can call hard scientific knowledge. On the contrary, and an excellent reason for re-considering them, is that they raised deep questions, and that the theoretical issues that drove them and were stated as conclusions, need both refinement and extension.

Parenthetically, the short life of experimental research programs is characteristic of social psychology (Pepitone, 1999). Not all the reasons for this have to do with their scientific merit but with assorted variables such as the death of a leader, the drying up of funds, problems of publication, etc. When programs die the accumulation of knowledge stops. Those who come into social psychology after research programs are gone will have no contact with the findings and theories, and will be unable to advance any potential scientific conclusions within that work.

Conformity in Judgments of a Physical Stimulus

Sherif (1935) was struck by a common observation in the field of visual perception: When a light stimulus lacks a frame of reference it becomes unstable. This is nicely illustrated buy the Autokinetic Effect. If one looks at a pinpoint stationary light in a dark field the light will be perceived within seconds to move in varying distances and directions. The inspiration came to Sherif that this state of the physical environment is exactly the condition that brings about the formation of social norms. In his classsic study the Participants (sometimes called Subjects, we will call them Ps henceforth) were asked to fixate on a light in a darkened room and to estimate vocally how far in inches the light had moved during its brief exposure. The basic conditions Sherif wanted to compare were the estimates of movement made by P alone with those made together with one or two others. There were two sequences: A beginning short segment of estimates made by individuals alone followed by a long segment of group estimates, and an opposite sequence in which group estimates were made in a short segment followed by individual estimates in the longer segment. The results clearly show that the individual estimates made in the first segment converge when they are made in a group, resulting in a central tendency. And in the other sequential pattern, the norm first established by the group continues to influence the alone estimates. Not until the last part of the long segment did the individuals begin to differ somewhat from one another. Of course, there were individual differences, but the general point made by the experiment is that when a physical stimulus cannot be accurately judged because it lacks a frame of reference, among those who make such judgments there arises a pressure to develop a shared estimate, a social norm which provides a framework for the judge to establish the correct, or more certainly correct, physical reality. We will hear more about the reality-providing function of group norms.

<u>Independence From the Majority</u>

There are physical stimulus situations that are not at all difficult to make judgments about. Some things are black or white, big or small. In such situations there is no need to create social norms to provide the most accurate estimate. More than a decade after the Sherif experiments, Asch (1952) designed an experiment that would measure independence of judgment despite pressure from the majority. The Asch studies can be interpreted as a reaction to the overwhelming emphasis in social psychology at that time on conformity, Such a view underestimated another side of social individuals - their independence. Asch was the most vocal social psychologist to take this position. His experiments were incredibly simple. Ps were presented with two rectangular cardboards on which were vertical lines. On one board there were three lines; on the other board there was one. The task of the P was to choose which of the three was exactly the length of the single "standard" line on the other board. In the first of several variations there was one P and 6-8 confederates of the Experimenter recruited from the pool of Ps. There were 12 pairs of cardboards or trials. On every trial, each member of the confederate majority would tell the choice to the Exp; P would be the last to choose. Of the 12 trials the majority was programmed to make errors, i.e. choose the wrong line to match the standard on 9. In one of the first experiments, of the total number of estimates made on the critical trials, 33% of them were in line with those of the majority. But like the proverbial half full, half empty cup of tea, two-thirds of the Ps' estimates were correct, that is, showed independence. In a control group where Ps recorded their judgments privately in writing the errors were only 7%. So the public announcement of one's choice definitely influenced the naïve Ps to go along with the majority when their senses should have told them that the majority was in error. . Looking more closely at individual differences shows that one-fifth of the Ps were completely independent - made no errors, and this rises to 42% if we allow only one error. In sum, one third of the estimates were conformist and more than half the Ps conformed to the majority on one trial. Asch interviewed many of his Ps and classified them into three categories: most of the conformers went along with the majority because 1) they "didn't want to stand out" …"to be different"…."to create an impression that they are strange"….. 2) a few actually were convinced that the majority was correct, 3) staunch independents.

Whether weak or strong there is conformity, even when there is no ambiguity about the physical stimulus. Thus, the Sherif theory that conforming tendencies occur when the stimulus situation lacks a frame of reference, and functions to establish a social norm to provide that objective frame of reference, is inapplicable. The Asch results suggest tautologically that people conform because nonconformity is negatively valent - in other words, social conformity, the need to be in line with the majority in the group, is an end in itself.

<u>Obeying orders to hurt others</u>

In the Sherif and Asch experiments, what influenced the P's judgments was the mere awareness of the judgments of others. What affected the P's estimates of light movement and the choice of lines that matched a standard in length was simply listening to the reactions of the others faced with the same stimulus. In real life, influence is often an explicit goal that people have when interacting with others. We are very familiar with the case where one person (or agency, institution, etc) gives orders to persons or groups to do, feel, or say something. If the order is obeyed there is a reward; if not, there is punishment. In many instances reward or punishment is implicit in the fact that it is issued by one with legitimate authority. Milgram's (1974) famous experiments fall within this category of social influence.

Adult male Ps were recruited by newspaper ads to participate in a study of memory and learning. Two appeared at the laboratory - on the campus of a prestigious university - and were told about the study by the Director of the project. One, a confederate of the Exp was assigned to be the "Learner"; the other, the naïve P, was to be the "Teacher". The task for the learner was to learn the correct paired associate word. The teacher follows a standard procedure: On each trial, he reads a word pair, then after pause, reads one of each pair. Finally, to test memory, four alternative words are read and P selects the one that he believes forms the correct pair. The P is to teach the learner by administering shock ordered by the Experimenter. He is shown Shock Generating Machine and its keyboard of 30 switches that he will be ordered to use whenever the learner makes a mistake. The switches delivered shocks ranging from 15 volts - the lowest - to 450 volts. Above the bank of switches are signs that verbally define the shock levels from "Slight", to "Dangerous" On the learner's first mistake the teacher is told to deliver the lowest 15 volt shock. On each subsequent error the shock is to be raised by 15 volts, and so on to the end point - the most extreme shock - or to the point where the teacher refuses to go on. We should add that in the original experiment the learner - who of course receives no shock - is instructed to knock on the wall when the shock level reaches 300 volts. As the teacher moves up the shock scale there is a crescendo of pounding until suddenly it stops as if something terrible has happened. In a variation of the experiment, he begins to express discomfort at 75 volts, complains loudly at 150 volts and wants to leave the experiment. At 285 volts, he lets out an agonized scream. If the teacher persisted to 300 volts, the Exp stopped the session. I mention these details because they tell us that Milgram's procedure from beginning to end was meticulously planned to be "ecologically valid". There should be no doubt in the teacher's mind that the learner is feeling the effects of the shocks.

In the original experiment, of the 40 Ps 26 escalated their shocks to the most dangerous level and administered the 450 volt switch!

Given the pain being inflicted and possible injury, how is the high level of obedience to be explained. Many Ps were visibly disturbed - head-shaking, repeatedly asking the Exp - "Must I go on?", wringing hands, getting up from the chair, and some refusing to go on.

The kind of obedience we observe is not driven by fear of punishment to be delivered in any direct way by the Exp. That is, the obedience is not like the case where a thief holds a gun to your head and says "your wallet or your life". Obedience is based on the attributed right of a legitimate authority to order the P to participate as a teacher in a experiment, for which payment was received, and based on an obligation the P accepted by signing an agreement. Given the commitment, obeying the Exp creates a moral conflict in P since it directs him to inflict pain and possibly injury on the learner. This universal moral norm is telling most Ps: "You should not, you must not, you have no right to, hurt that person". There is also a component that resembles the social conformity motive already mentioned , namely, the P's not wanting to be seen by the Exp as "different", "uncooperative", "uneducated". It is important to note that the relative strength of the two forces change as the experiment proceeds. As he becomes aware of the discomfort and pain being inflicted on the learner, the seriousness of his violation becomes stronger and his commitment to the experiment weaker.

Finally, although the explanation we have offered is sufficient, there is a consideration that must have been operating in some Ps and falls under the category of an experimenter effect. Beyond his assessment of his obligations and his moral compunctions about hurting someone that could create an excruciating conflict in some Ps, there might have been an article of faith that no respectable authority, no scientist in a great university, and no contract, would permit a study in which innocent people are seriously harmed. (A review of world history would make it easy to conclude that such faith in the ultimate humanity of governments and their rulers can be a total illusion.)

<u>Influence in the Small Group</u>

In the social influence research we have looked at thus far, the relationships among the Ps and between the P and the Exp have been rather weak. There was not much, if any, spontaneous interaction among the parties. This is not to say that the research fails to map the real world. Much social influence is precisely more or less anomic, involving strangers. But in the real world much influence also takes place within small groups - families, work, school, neighborhoods, clubs, sports, and various interpersonal relationships. A prima facie observation is that those who are part of such relationships are privileged in being able to influence each other in the realms of behavior, emotion, and cognition.

{A historical note about research and theory in Group Dynamics. In 1933, Kurt Lewin who had been one of the Gestalt psychologists at Berlin arrived in the US and began his second career at the University of Iowa and the Massachusetts of Technology until his untimely death in 1947 at age 57. It was at MIT that he founded the Research Center for Group Dynamics. The main goal of the Center was to carry out experimental and field research to establish general theories of group behavior. Many of Lewin's field theory concepts and metatheoretical perspectives developed in the Berlin days primarily to construct an individual psychology were carried over into the group level of analysis, but new models had to be developed. (Two books provide a comprehensive coverage of Lewin's contributions. D. Cartwright (Ed.) Field theory and social science. New York: Harpers,1951; M.Gold (Ed.) The complete social scientist. A Kurt Lewin reader. Washington,D.C: American Psychological Association}.

One program at the MIT Center under the direction of Leon Festinger was focussed on social influence in the small group. A starting assumption of this research group was that a primary function of communication within groups is influence, and that much of the effect of this influence is to move the group members toward greater uniformity. Thus, when individuals are the unit of analysis, we talk of conformity to group norms or convergence, but at the group level influence communications tends to produce uniformity. Festinger (1951) proposed two hypotheses that account for group uniformity: 1) Group members attempt to influence each other, and become themselves disposed to change, in order to facilitate achievement of group goals, and 2) If uniformity helps the group, it also helps the group members in confirming the validity of their opinions, attitudes, and beliefs by providing a social criterion of reality. To hold opinions that are right, true, valid is a universal need. Some opinions, sometimes can be confirmed by an objective test. If, for example, the opinion is about something in the physical world, there are often available "validity checks" to prove the opinion is right, including reliable authority. But where no such "objective" criterion is available, people have to look to the social world for help in satisfying the need. More precisely, the hypothesis states that when the need is aroused by the perception of discrepancies of opinion in the group, members will communicate with each other to bring about greater uniformity of opinion that will provide the necessary social reality. It is interesting to note that, independently of the social reality hypothesis in group dynamics research, was the postmodern philosophical discourse on the social construction of reality. The idea was also discussed by sociologists within the framework of the sociology of knowledge in the mid 1960s (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The communications intended to influence others to change their positions to bring about greater uniformity are selective as to their direction. They are not directed randomly toward any other group member. Obviously, given their function they are not directed toward those who hold the same position. Indeed, most communications are directed toward those holding divergent opinions from the communicator. In one experiment (Festinger, 1950), 70% of the communications during the discussion period were increasingly over time addressed to those who held opinions at the extremes of the distribution. There is, however, a limit introduced when the person holding an extreme position is perceived as being nonmember or not wanted as a member. In such a case, the rising volume of communication toward that position begins to fall off sharply. Theoretically, this pattern is interpreted as a rejection of a deviate.

In an experiment by Schachter (1951), a confederate of the Exp played the role of a P who throughout the discussion period maintained an extreme position despite the experimentally created strong pressure toward uniformity. In line with the hypothesis that groups in which the strongest uniformity pressure had been created, communication toward this extreme position increased in greater acceleration and volume than in other experimental groups through more than half the discussion period. Then, the volume sharply dropped. In support of the interpretation of the communication pattern, the members of the group that rejected the extremist via communication also rated his competence most negatively compared with the other experimental groups.

From a broader perspective, rejection of deviates is an instance of group reorganization and formation, which are common features of groups. In the life of groups new members come in, old members, and those who prefer different goals, values, membership traits, etc. leave, on their own initiative, because the group would like them to, or both. The second point to keep in mind is that, although rejection of deviates by the majority of group members is a basic group dynamic, the role of the deviate or the minority generally should not be overlooked.

<u>Majority-Minority Influence</u>

Moscovici (1976) has been a major critic of group dynamics theories of social influence for neglecting the important role of the minority in the influence process. One empirical argument in support of the argument is that when measures of influence are made in private the influence of minority group members is stronger, and indeed can be greater than that effected by the majority (Moscovici & Lage, 1976). More broadly, to deny the minority the capacity to influence the majority is to exclude from consideration a powerful real life source of influence through innovation and invention by those creative minds that function out of the mainstream.

Among the conditions that produce greater minority influence is consistency of the divergent opinion. In one experiment on color naming (Moscovici, Lage, & Naffrechoux, 1969), four Ps were shown a Blue color on slides. The reported verbally the color they saw after two confederates reported they saw the color Green. Then each P was directed to another experiment - said to be unrelated - in which he was tested individually. Now he was presented with a series of color discs, all within the Blue-Green part of the color spectrum. The results show that the previous exposure of the Ps to the minority confederates had a significant influence on Ps who now with significantly greater frequency report seeing Green discs initially and correctly reported as Blue.

Minority influence has been shown not only in the report of color on the slide presented first but on the afterimage of that color. In the Moscovici & Personnaz (1980), after hearing the confederate report a Blue slide to be Green (and receiving data that a majority of viewers previously had also reported that), Ps privately reported afterimages of that slide that were significantly shifted to the after image of Green, that is from Yellow-Orange to Red-Purple)!

The private-public difference in minority influence brings up an important issue in social influence research - the distinction between compliance and conformity. The greater effect of the minority revealed in private is evidence that public conformity does not reflect a real change of opinion, attitude, belief, etc. to that held by the majority. The question - what determines influence that produce real change? Festinger (1953) proposed the general condition: "Public compliance with private acceptance will occur when there is a desire on the part of the person to remain in the existing relationship with those attempting to influence him". More succinctly put, attraction to the group or group cohesiveness is the condition that determines true conformity as opposed to mere compliance. Also to be taken into account is the credibility of the source, particularly when the influence is "informational". In this regard, an early distinction was made by Deutsch & Girard (1955) between "normative" and "informational" social influence. When the opinions to be changed are about an informational matter - "In my opinion global warming is causing major weather changes around the world" - the source's credibility is the key to whether the opinions the source wants changed are right, valid, and real. In the case of normative influence, on the other hand, the correctness by definition rests on the creation of a social reality.

Social Comparison Theory

The group dynamics research on social influence was profoundly changed by a generalization of a major theory of the motivation underlying pressures toward uniformity. As already discussed, the need to hold opinions that are correct, true, real, etc. causes, in the absence of objective tests, group members to create a social reality defined by uniformity. The theory was extended to cover the reality testing of emotions and abilities. In the former case, the question for the uncertain group member is - are my feelings appropriate in the situation, are they the right responses to the emotional stimulus? In the latter case, is the estimate I have of my ability correct - am I better or poorer? The evidence for these extensions of the social reality theory is, in my view, not overwhelming (see for example Schachter, (1959).

As to the generalizing leap, Festinger (1954) introduced social comparison theory that postulated a need to <u>evaluate</u> abilities and opinions. The need is not only to have correct opinions and accurate estimates of abilities but to find out how good or bad they are. In the absence or inadequacy of objective criteria for such evaluations, people tend to obtain them by comparisons of their opinions and abilities with those of others. The latter are not necessarily individuals in their own group, but may be other groups - so called reference groups. To obtain reliable evaluations, the comparison cannot be with opinions and abilities that are greatly discrepant from one's own. An amateur pianist does not compare her level of playing with Brendel, a physics graduate student with Enrico Fermi, and a modern painter with Picasso. In other words, evaluation of opinions and abilities through social comparison requires selectivity in deciding on the comparison "target". Whereas mere similarity of other group members' opinion can be sufficient for establishing correctness, more specific expertise or intellectual "standing" would be required in evaluation. To sum up, the big effect of social comparison theory on the group dynamics of influence is that evaluation comparisons are made by individuals with a variety of groups not necessarily within a group with whose members she is interacting. The theory enlarged the context of the influence process and took the theory of social influence out of the small group.

Dissonance Theory

After only a few years of social comparison theory, Festinger (1957) produced a still more general cognitive motivational theory in his book on cognitive dissonance. This extraordinarily seminal theory produced a large literature of experimental research over more than a decade. Cognitive dissonance is a statement about a universal cognitive process that transcends group interaction and is not particularly focussed on social influence, nor is it in any generic way a concept in social psychology.

Attitude Change

Throughout its history social psychology has been trying to define itself. The search for identity is an unfinished task partly because the field has a basic dual identity - psychology and social science. However, insofar as social psychology is most typically situated in university psychology departments or equivalent entities, its "majority" identity has been with the individual unit of analysis with the broad mission to explain how the social environment affects the individual.

From the individual perspective persuasion and attitude change was defined from the 1950s into the 1980s as a major area of research. One of the attractive features of the area was its self-evident practical utility in commerce, politics, economics, public health, etc. Research was stimulated by a simple modeling of the categories of variables in the change process:

A. The persuader, characteristics and context. ---→ B. The message and the medium by which it is transmitted --→ C. The targeted recipient of the message and the context.

Most research in social psychology on attitude change is centered on Part C. A considerable literature has grown on the issue of the persistence and the level or quality of change brought about by the persuasion. Such questions as - Was the change temporary, only public, and mere compliance (discussed earlier in this paper), or did the change last and was it "internalized". An early theoretical statement concerning the internalization of persuasive messages underscores their relationship to the recipients value system (Kelman, 1958). There is also an extremely interesting body of research on the role of fear arousal in attitude change (Janis, 1967).

Like the group dynamics of influence, attitude change research has markedly declined in recent years. Perhaps because of its real world significance the research has moved out of the academic and laboratory settings into that everyday world. It might also be the case that because of the dominance of "applied" issues, the development of a theoretical base as the goal of research was inhibited.

Macro Social Psychology: Movements, Crowds, and Publics and other Masses

In the 19th century "gestational" period when the term social psychology was only implicit, social influence was a major subject of inquiry. The questions of interest had to do with the character and behavior of people in aggregates including crowds, publics, national and religious groups. Empirical research as we know it today was not yet developed as a necessary tool to advance such inquiries. But theoretical analysis mostly in Western Europe was both vigorous and voluminous, featuring concepts such as imitation, contagion, sympathy, suggestion, and the most famous of all, the "crowd mind". Little of this work became defined later as part of social psychology, neither as an area for theoretical analysis nor as a field of research on social influence at the macro level. Indeed, the principal legacy is the chapter in some textbooks that provides an overview of the work carried out many decades ago. What happened? How can we account for the demise of the original social psychology?

One self-evident interpretation is that the leading thinkers did not influence their contemporaries in a way that led the latter to pursue the ideas and pass them on to future psychologists. Wundt's 12-volumes of Volkerpsychologie did not create a theoretical template that stimulated research programs on the "higher mental processes", nor convince enough followers that Volkseele was the key concept in understanding the mentality of ethno-national groups. LeBon's "crowd mind" caught the public's imagination, but aroused mostly critical appraisal from academic psychologists who put it down as sensationalistic journalism. Tarde's concept of imitation was more acceptable as a description of the influence process across large publics. Unlike the unseen and mystical crowd mind, imitation is a common observation. But, although the concept continued to be used in Sociology (for example, by Cooley, cf. Human nature and the social order, 1902), it did not go very far with social psychologists, who wanted to know the conditions under which imitation behavior will be initiated, who and what will be imitated, and about any after-effects of imitation on the imitator and the imitated.

In sum, the reason the work of the early social psychologists was resisted, particularly by those who viewed the field as a science, had mainly to do with the fact that the theorizing was speculative with little compelling empirical foundation, and lacked focus on empirically answerable questions.

From a contemporary perspective, there are focussed research questions in social psychology relevant to social influence in aggregated units of people. In order to construct valid theories from such research, however, additional concepts must be brought into the analysis. Let us look at some of the dynamics in the violent aggression by protest, insurgent, revolutionary movements and unorganized crowds that are common in many parts of the world.

Mass Aggression and Violence

Aggression came to be a prominent subject in clinical and other sectors of psychology largely through the influence of psychoanalysis and the theories of Freud. But it was the book Frustration and Aggression (Dollard, et al, 1939) that brought aggressive behavior into the framework of stimulus-response learning theory and research. As proposed, the F-A theory could account for all human and animal aggressive responses whose goal was injury. However, the concept of frustration was overgeneralized and failed to account for conceptual distinctions, e.g. between blockage of a goal and violation of moral principles. Moreover, aggression at the level of groups and large masses is not easily understood by an individualistic theory.

Experiments on "deindividuation" (Festinger, Pepitone & Newcomb, 1952; Cannavale, Scarr & Pepitone, 1970; Diener, 1980) are relevant to mass aggression. They have identified a process in groups that allows for the disinhibition of anger and other feelings and actions that are normally restrained or repressed when there is pressure to express those feelings or perform those actions. The experiments confirm the hypothesis that given a build-up of hostile feelings in a group, members tend to withdraw attention from one another - they cease seeing each other as individuals. When sufficient deindividuation is achieved internal inhibitions are reduced and the hostile feelings are expressed.

A closer analysis of mass aggression in the real world, however, suggests that the expression of violent aggression, rage and destruction, is not exclusively a matter of disinhibition. Throughout history, such extreme behavior in masses more closely reflects an affirmation of political and religious identity, an assertive manifestation of ideological fervor, rather than a lifting of inner restraint via a process of deindividuation. This is not to deny the relevance of anonymity, that is, hiding identity from those who can punish persons who behave in unacceptable ways. But the major dynamic is identification with political or religious ideology and belief system. (A research program that focuses on the functions of "nonmaterial" beliefs. Pepitone, 1991a, 1991b; Pepitone & Saffiotti, 1997).

Science oriented social psychology has been reluctant to examine the influences of political and religious identity, ideology, and belief systems on social behavior. Although the role of religion in mental health, altruism, and other areas is acceptable, subjects like martyrdom, genocide, and sectarian warfare have been off limits.

Evolution of Social Behavior and Public Social Psychology

As one of the psychological sciences, social psychology shares the goal of developing generalizations about social behavior that are universal across human populations. Moreover, some argue that such generalizations, like the laws of physics, should be valid across long stretches of time. But concepts modeled on theoretical physics are not feasible for the reason that the behavior social psychology endeavors to explain is continually changing. What causes social behaviors to change are the fundamental changes in society and the physical environment. Over time, social behavior is adaptive to new conditions of life that are brought about by technological changes such as the Internet, diseases and their management, political changes caused by wars and revolutions, economic changes affecting poverty and the distribution of wealth, and so on. Eventually all such conditions that affect life modify old or create new value and belief systems, which in turn stimulate new modes of social behavior in the large populations or publics in which those values and beliefs are significant. Although speculative, evolutionary changes in social behavior are suggested by two areas of research in social psychology - group stereotypes and group identity.

<u>Stereotypes</u>

Since the journalist Walter Lippman first used the term in his 1931 book Public Opinion, research on group stereotypes has accumulated a long bibliography. The large body of work shows that the use of stereotypes - a selected set of negative and positive traits to describe national, racial, and other groups - is widespread across many cultures. Among the issues dealt with by research on stereotypes, three are most prominent: 1) whether stereotypes change and the conditions that cause the change, 2) the role of prejudice in creating and maintaining negative stereotypes, and 3) the accuracy of the traits that make up the stereotype. (In more recent approaches, stereotypes have become part of the study of social cognition and treated as "illusory correlation" or other kind of "error" in cognitive processing).

Theoretically, it is important to note that group stereotypes are categories that are employed to communicate descriptions and evaluations of various parts of the social and nonsocial environment. We categorize genders, the professions of law and medicine, the commercial world; governmental policies, and institutions are "Left", "Right", or "Center", and we categorize or literally classify cuisine, life-style, culture, and literature as "high" or "low". We who categorize rarely question the accuracy of our stereotypes.

Nor do we believe that the categories are estimates or indices, such as averages, or "kernels of truth". The categories are to be taken literally for what we believe to be true descriptions and evaluations. In short, social categories represent the social world as we know it. Based only on informal observation, we believe that the construction and communication of social categories have become normative in large publics because of two major related conditions: 1. the communication revolution in the last half century, and 2 the exponentially increasing complexity and differentiation of our world. The mass communication industry manufactures social categories and transmits them to large publics. The complexity has made it difficult to communicate in concrete, mutually understandable terms. It is also the case that today people have contact with a greater variety of other people than they did in earlier times. This means that there is intimate knowledge of fewer people, hence the greater use of categorical social communication.

<u>Group Identity</u>

Research on group identity began in the early 1970s with Tajfel's experiment on ingroup bias using the minimum group design. The long line of experiments that followed have shown that mere random assignment of Ps to one of two arbitrary categories, neither one of any great significance on any value scale, is sufficient to produce in P a positive bias favoring the category that the P was assigned to, and discrimination against the category he was not assigned to. What underlies this outcome is the Ps identification with the arbitrary, insignificant category. At first blush, the idea that identity with a category is an essential variable seems surprising. But looking beyond the laboratory at the real world, such kinds of identity are ubiquitous and normal. People identify with almost any category - historical eras, geographic regions, abstract philosophies, obscure religious ways of life, diets and other health regimens, individual performers of the stage, cinema, and of music, and, of course, with ideological movements.

In summary, categories are the units of social language that represent the social world and used to communicate with it. Such communication can act not only to influence others but as self-directed propaganda. People not only communicate categories but identify with them. Ethno-political conflicts can be analyzed in terms of the category identities and the emotions and motives they arouse without reference to actions between groups "on the ground".

The Social Psychology of Social Influence

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