

Social Biases and Pressures

Critical Thinking

Humans are Social Animals

- We are very sensitive to what others do and think.
- Most of our deep-rooted beliefs and values come from family and society we grow up in.
- But even as adults, our actions and beliefs are subject to peer pressure, professional persuaders, and authority figures.

How to Cope with Social Pressures

- Much of it is unavoidable
- But, knowing something about the specific mechanisms and causes allows us to build in safeguards

Society and Thinking

- In many ways, we have to rely on others, as we just don't have the time to figure it all out
 - Indeed, society allows us to figure out more than we could by ourselves
- On the other hand, there is a danger to rely on others as well
 - We may end up doing or believing things that are not in our own, or anyone's, best interest
- Even worse, sometimes people are forced to rely on the thinking of others
 - Decisions are being made for them (usually with the best intentions in mind, but even if the decisions are good decision, there is a real issue of autonomy here)
 - Independent thought is discouraged or oppressed

Some specific Ways in which Others Influence our Thinking

- Socialization:
 - Long-term immersion in what others do
- Experts/Authorities:
 - Teachers, books, media, etc.
- Persuasion:
 - Others intentionally trying to make us believe or do something
- Presence:
 - The presence of others, or having an audience
- Conformation:
 - Trying to belong to a group
- Obedience:
 - Following authority figures
- Note: There is clearly a lot of overlap between these. They are just different ways of thinking about social effect.

Socialization

- This is mostly an effect of how our brains ‘wire up’ as a result of the experiences we have.
- Happens when we are growing up, and our brains are most plastic and impressionable.
- Concerns our most deep-seated beliefs (values, morals, religious beliefs, etc)
- Psychologists refer to this as institutionalized thinking
- When we are older, we are less susceptible to socialization, as our brains are less plastic, and possibly because we have developed critical thinking skills.
- Our brains being less plastic, however, also means that it is very hard for us to ever come to reject any of these beliefs

When Should We Believe What Others Tell Us, If Ever?

- Some things to think about:
 - Is there a need to take a stance on this issue (e.g. in order to make certain decisions and proceed with life?)
 - If no such need, you may want to suspend judgment
 - Is the claim itself credible?
 - What, given everything else we know (or at least have good reasons to believe) is the initial plausibility of that claim?
 - Is the source credible?

Credibility of Sources

- Some things to think about:
 - Who or what is the source?
 - Sometimes it's one of those “scientists say ...”
 - How knowledgeable would the source be about this?
 - Would the source be in a position to know about this?
 - Proximity to the subject matter
 - Can anyone even know about this?
 - Does the source have the skills to extract the proper information?
 - What is the education, experience, past accomplishments, reputation of source?
 - Could the source be biased?
 - Note: If the source may be biased, don't reject the claim (that would be a fallacy!), but don't accept the claim either.
 - What do others say about this?
 - Is there a general consensus?
 - Note: it is **always** a good idea to ‘get a second opinion’!

The Media

- Some things to think about as far as possible bias in the media is concerned:
 - Business:
 - Increase revenue: make it sound exciting and bite-sized (details and subtleties often get glossed over. Complete stories don't get reported)
 - Cut costs: do less investigative journalism, rely more on press releases
 - Consumers:
 - We buy what we want, so media will give us what we want
 - As stockholders, we want the media to make \$
 - Advertisers:
 - Advertisers are main source of \$ for media outlets. Advertisers can threaten to pull ads when media is about to report on something.
 - Government:
 - Can censor and even 'manufacture' news

Persuasion

- Often through rational argument
- But we have also seen the kinds of rhetorical ploys and emotional appeals that people use.
- Some other ‘tricks of the trade’, exploiting social relationships we have with other people:
 - Foot-in-the-door technique
 - Door-in-the-face technique
 - Just-ask-and-bullshit technique

Persuasion: Foot-in-the-door

- Basic idea: get people to do or believe something small and reasonable, and then make it bigger.
- Why it works: by agreeing to smaller request, people start to have affiliation with the requester and the idea, which can then be exploited
- Examples:
 - 1966 billboard study with Palo Alto residents
 - Foot: 3 inch lawn sign “Be a Safe Driver”
 - Then: Big billboard “Drive Carefully”: 55% agreed
 - Lowballing
 - After agreeing to salesprice, salesperson goes to back room, and comes back with some ‘news’:
 - Additional fee
 - Requested model not available, but more expensive alternative

Persuasion: Door-in-the-face

- Basic Idea: First make unreasonably large request, which gets rejected, then go for something smaller
- Why it Works: People feel bad for saying no, and want to make up for it
- Examples:
 - Working with juveniles study
 - First request: Volunteer to work with juveniles for 2 hours a week for 2 years: everyone disagreed
 - Follow-up: Chaperone a group of juveniles one time to the zoo: those that were asked initial request were 3 times as likely to agree

Persuasion: Just-Bullshit technique

- Basic idea: just bullshit
- Why it works: people like to help other people, and will be looking for any justification to do so, even if that is just bullshit
- Example:
 - Copier line:
 - People tried to cut in line at copier in front of other people with no explanation given: very few people let them
 - But when they said: “Excuse me, can I cut in line, because I need to make some copies”, many more people let them

Presence

- Sometimes, just the mere presence of others has an effect on our actions
- Social facilitation: having an audience improves our thinking and performance
- Social impairment: having an audience hinders our thinking and performance

Conformation

- Two reasons to conform:
 - To belong to a group
 - To be correct
 - Social Proof: Using what others think or do as ‘proof’ that that is correct
 - If everyone is looking up, presumably there is something important to see there
 - If everyone else is using the small fork for the salad, then that is probably the fork that you should be using
- But conformation can go very wrong!

Do I stand or remain seated?



Albany Students 'celebrating' St. Patrick's



Gotta get that flatscreen TV!



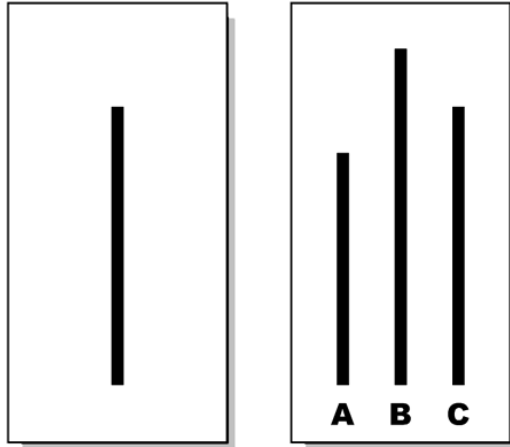
Flavor Aid, Anyone?



No Comment



Asch's (1950's) Conformity Experiments



A subject was placed in a group of people (who subject believed were just a bunch of other subjects, but who were in fact part of the experiment), and asked questions such as on the left: "The line on the left is just as long as which of the lines on the right?"

After all the other people would say B, many subjects (about 1/3) went along with this obviously incorrect answer!

Some other findings:

- All other people had to be in agreement for subject to go along:
 - It only takes 1 person to 'break the spell'
- People from different cultures showed different rates of conformity
- Think subjects were just saying this? Think again! In 2005, Berns repeated these experiments, but this time recorded brain activity. Subjects who 'went along' showed activity in areas dealing with spatial processing, but not in areas dealing with conscious deception or emotional salience, while the ones who 'stuck with their guns' showed activity in latter area.

Obedience

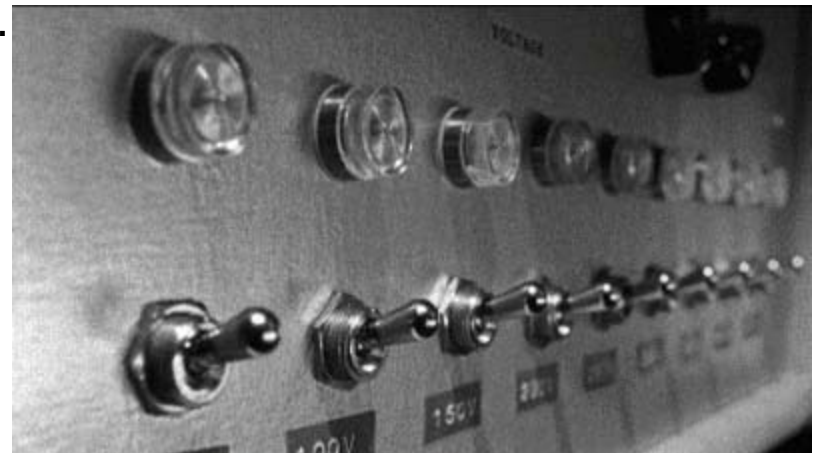
- Like conformity, obedience has its practical advantages.
- But there are some real dangers here as well. Excessive deference to authority can eliminate any kind of common sense or rational thought.

Milgram's Obedience Study



In the early 1960's, Stanley Milgram ran a famous study in obedience. Subjects would come in and were told that they had to administer a test to someone else, and shock them (with increasing voltage) if they got a wrong answer. Subject could hear screams of pain from test-taker, but whenever subject thought about stopping, the experimenter would say to continue. Many subjects continued all the way to the point where test-taker had ceased screaming.

Actor plays part of test-taker being shocked



Shock Box

Stanford Prison Experiment

- Subjects were randomly assigned to take role of either prisoner or prison guard, and put in realistic prison environment.
- Quickly, the prison guards became abusive (often much more abusive than real prison guards, who thankfully go through much training!), while the prisoners became desperate.
- Read an account of the experimenter, Philip Zimbardo, here: <http://www.prisonexp.org/>
- Even he himself got into the role!



What Happened Here?



Abu Ghraib Prison Scandal

One possible explanation for the findings of Milgram's experiment is that the subjects felt that they weren't responsible for their actions. Indeed, many subjects after the experiment said: "But I was told to do so"

Is this what happened at Abu Ghraib?

Or were they swept into some strange mental state of power or revenge?

Or was it just a few bad apples?

An important question!

Loss of Individuality

- One of the most effective ways to ensure conformity and obedience is through the loss of individuality by e.g. wearing same uniform, shaving heads, and assigning numbers.
- Such individuality may be one of the most essential aspects of critical thinking: independent thinking!



A Lack of Independent Thinking

