**Conformity : Informational social influence**

**INTRODUCTION** Describes the case of David R. Stewart who is accused of calling fast food restaurants, posing as a police officer, and instructing the manager on duty to conduct a strip search of an employee.

**CONFORMITY: WHEN AND WHY**

• **Conformity** is a change in behavior due to the real or imagined influence of others.

• American culture celebrates the rugged individualist, but even in our own culture extremes of conformity, such as Jonestown, Heaven’s Gate, and the My Lai massacre occur. Social psychologists suggest that these events occurred not because the people involved were crazy but because they were subjected to very strong situational influences.

**INFORMATIONAL SOCIAL INFLUENCE: THE NEED TO KNOW WHAT’S “RIGHT”**

• In many situations, we are uncertain how to think or to act. We use the behavior of others to help us figure out what is going on in the situation and what to do about it. **Informational social influence** occurs when we conform because we see other people as a source of information. We conform because we believe that others’ interpretation of an ambiguous situation is more correct than ours and will help us choose an appropriate course of action.

• Humans are not the only ones who engage in informational social influence. Whiten et al. (1999) show that chimpanzees pass on new and innovative behaviors to each other through informational social influence, demonstrating that particular groups develop behavioral conventions that are not seen in other groups.

• Sherif (1936) conducted an experiment that made use of the autokinetic effect, the illusion that a still point of light in an otherwise dark visual field moves. People vary in how much motion they perceive. Thus the autokinetic effect provides an ambiguous situation. When people were put in groups to make their estimates, over several trials the differing estimates of the people converged (Figure 8.1). This conformity was apparently due to informational social influence because it resulted in **private acceptance** of the group norm out of genuine belief in their correctness (rather than **public compliance**, or a change in behavior without a change in belief): participants in variations of the study maintained their adherence to the group norm in private and up to a year later.

• Administrators at colleges and universities combat binge drinking among their students via the “social norms method” in which students receive accurate information about the drinking levels on their campus, which are typically lower than students believe them to be.

**A. The Importance of Being Accurate**

• Recent research has extended Sherif’s work by employing judgment tasks that are more like real life and demonstrating that the importance to the individual of being accurate at the task affects informational social influence.

• Baron, Vandello, & Brunsman (1996) gave participants an eyewitness task, showing them a picture of a perpetrator and then having them pick that person out of a lineup. The task was made ambiguous by having the perpetrator dressed differently in the lineup than in the original photo and by flashing the lineup for only half a second. The importance of the task was manipulated by telling some groups that this was a new test to identify accurate eyewitnesses that the local police department was adopting, that they were helping develop norms for the task, and that they would receive $20; and by telling other groups that the task was a test under development. Participants completed the task in groups with three confederates who gave the wrong answer on seven critical trials. Baron et al. found that Ps were more influenced (in this case by informational social influence) by the confederate’s answers when the task was more important—an important extension of Sherif’s work.

**B. When Informational Conformity Backfires** • Informational influence is often involved in crisis situations. For example, the 1938 Orson Welles *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast (a teleplay, presented in broadcast news format, about an alien invasion) led to widespread panic because many people missed the beginning of the broadcast (which identified it as a play) and turned to each other to see how they should behave. Additionally people interpreted other events in their environment (e.g., no cars driving down the street) as due to the invasion, intensifying their fears and leading to a **contagion** situation (one where emotions or behaviors spread rapidly through a crowd).

• Another example of informational conformity backfiring is **mass psychogenic illness**, the occurrence, in a group of people, of similar physical symptoms with no known physical cause.

• A recent case occurred in Tennessee in 1998 when a teacher and many students experienced a variety of symptoms that led to their being hospitalized and the school evacuated. No physical cause for the incident was found. Jones et al. (2000) determined that mass psychogenic illness was the cause.

• Cases of mass psychogenic illness typically begin with just one or a few people, and typically these people are experiencing some kind of stress in their lives. As a reasonable explanation for the illness is developed, it becomes more credible and thus more widespread.

• Such occurrences can spread more rapidly today than formerly because of instantaneously available media (which can also more quickly try to squelch the panic).

**C. When Will People Conform to Informational Social Influence?**

**1. When the Situation Is Ambiguous.**

• Ambiguity is the most crucial variable in determining whether people use each other as a source of information.

**2. When the Situation Is a Crisis.**

• Crisis situations leave us limited time to act, which may make us scared and panicky. If we turn to others who are also panicked for information, our own panic and irrationality may be intensified.

**3. When Other People Are Experts.**

• The more expertise or knowledge someone has, the more people will turn to them as a guide in an ambiguous situation. Unfortunately experts are not always reliable sources of information.