

Interacting With Others: Helping, Hurting, and Conforming

Humans have developed a variety of social skills that enhance our ability to successfully interact with others. We are often helpful, even when that helping comes at some cost to ourselves, and we often change our opinions and beliefs to fit in with the opinions of those whom we care about. Yet we also are able to be aggressive if we feel the situation warrants it.

Helping Others: Altruism Helps Create Harmonious Relationships

Altruism refers to *any behaviour that is designed to increase another person's welfare, and particularly those actions that do not seem to provide a direct reward to the person who performs them* (Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006). Altruism occurs when we stop to help a stranger who has been stranded on the highway, when we volunteer at a homeless shelter, or when we donate to a charity. In Canada, 47% of the population volunteers (Vézina & Crompton, 2012). Over 13.3 million Canadians aged 15 and over did volunteer work in 2010. They devoted almost 2.07 billion hours to their volunteer activities: a volume of work that is equivalent to just under 1.1 million full-time jobs. The number of volunteers in 2010 was significantly greater than in earlier years. The 13.3 million people who volunteered marked an increase of 6.4% over 2007 and of 12.5% over 2004.

Why Are We Altruistic?

Because altruism is costly, you might wonder why we engage in it at all. There are a variety of explanations for the occurrence of altruism, and Table 15.3, "Some of the Variables Known to Increase Helping," summarizes some of the variables that are known to increase helping.

Table 15.3 Some of the Variables Known to Increase Helping. [u](#)

[\[Skip Table\]](#)

Positive moods	We help more when we are in a good mood (Guéguen & De Gail, 2003).
Similarity	We help people whom we see as similar to us, for instance, those who mimic our behaviours (van Baaren, Holland, Kawakami, & van Knippenberg, 2004).
Guilt	If we are experiencing guilt, we may help in order to relieve those negative feelings.
Empathy	We help more when we feel empathy for the other person (Batson, O'Quin, Fultz, Varnderplas, & Isen, 1983).
Benefits	We are more likely to help if we can feel good about ourselves by doing so (Snyder, Omoto, & Lindsay, 2004).

Personal
responsibility

We are more likely to help if it is clear that others are not helping.

Self-presentation

We may help in order to show others that we are good people (Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006).

The tendency to help others in need is in part a functional evolutionary adaptation (Figure 15.7, “Helping Other People”). Although helping others can be costly to us as individuals, helping people who are related to us can perpetuate our own genes (Madsen et al., 2007; McAndrew, 2002; Stewart-Williams, 2007). Burnstein, Crandall, and Kitayama (1994) found that students indicated they would be more likely to help a person who was closely related to them (e.g., a sibling, parent, or child) than they would be to help a person who was more distantly related (e.g., a niece, nephew, uncle, or grandmother). People are more likely to donate kidneys to relatives than to strangers (Borgida, Conner, & Manteufel, 1992) and even children indicate that they are more likely to help their siblings than they are to help a friend (Tisak & Tisak, 1996).



Figure 15.7 Helping Other People.

We help in part to make ourselves feel good, but also because we care about the welfare of others.

Although it makes evolutionary sense that we would help people to whom we are related, why would we help people to whom we are not related? One explanation for such behaviour is based on the principle of *reciprocal altruism* (Krebs & Davies, 1987; Trivers, 1971). **Reciprocal altruism** is the principle that, if we help other people now, those others will return the favour should we need their help in the future. By helping others, we both increase our chances of survival and reproductive success and help others increase their survival too. Over the course of evolution, those who engage in reciprocal altruism should be able to reproduce more often than those who do not, thus enabling this kind of altruism to continue.

We also learn to help by modelling the helpful behaviour of others. Although people frequently worry about the negative impact of the violence that is seen on TV, there is also a great deal of helping behaviour shown on television. Smith et al. (2006) found that 73% of TV shows had some altruism, and that about three altruistic behaviours were shown every hour. Furthermore,

the prevalence of altruism was particularly high in children's shows. But just as viewing altruism can increase helping, modelling of behaviour that is not altruistic can decrease altruism. For instance, Anderson and Bushman (2001) found that playing violent video games led to a decrease in helping.

We are more likely to help when we receive rewards for doing so and less likely to help when helping is costly. Parents praise their children who share their toys with others, and may reprimand children who are selfish. We are more likely to help when we have plenty of time than when we are in a hurry (Darley & Batson, 1973). Another potential reward is the status we gain as a result of helping. When we act altruistically, we gain a reputation as a person with high status who is able and willing to help others, and this status makes us more desirable in the eyes of others (Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006)

The outcome of the reinforcement and modelling of altruism is the development of social norms about helping — standards of behaviour that we see as appropriate and desirable regarding helping. The **reciprocity norm** reminds us that we should follow the principles of reciprocal altruism. *If someone helps us, then we should help them in the future, and we should help people now with the expectation that they will help us later if we need it.* The reciprocity norm is found in everyday adages such as “Scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” and in religious and philosophical teachings such as the “golden rule”: “Do unto other as you would have them do unto you.”

Because helping based on the reciprocity norm is based on the return of earlier help and the expectation of a future return from others, it might not seem like true altruism. We might hope that our children internalize another relevant social norm that seems more altruistic: the *social responsibility norm*. The **social responsibility norm** tells us that we should try to help others who need assistance, even without any expectation of future paybacks. The teachings of many religions are based on the social responsibility norm; that we should, as good human beings, reach out and help other people whenever we can.

How the Presence of Others Can Reduce Helping

Late at night on March 13, 1964, 28-year-old Kitty Genovese was murdered within a few yards of her apartment building in New York City after a violent fight with her killer in which she struggled and screamed. When the police interviewed Kitty's neighbours about the crime, they discovered that 38 of the neighbours indicated that they had seen or heard the fight occurring but not one of them had bothered to intervene, and only one person had called the police.

Was Kitty Genovese murdered because there were too many people who heard her cries? Watch this video for an analysis.



[Watch: The Case of Kitty Genovese \[YouTube\]:](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JozmWS6xYEW)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JozmWS6xYEW>

Two social psychologists, Bibb Latané and John Darley, were interested in the factors that influenced people to help (or not to help) in such situations (Latané & Darley, 1968). They developed a model (see Figure 15.8 Latané & Darley Model) that took into consideration the important role of the social situation in determining helping. The model has been extensively tested in many studies, and there is substantial support for it. Social psychologists have discovered that it was the 38 people themselves that contributed to the tragedy, because people are less likely to notice, interpret, and respond to the needs of others when they are with others than they are when they are alone.

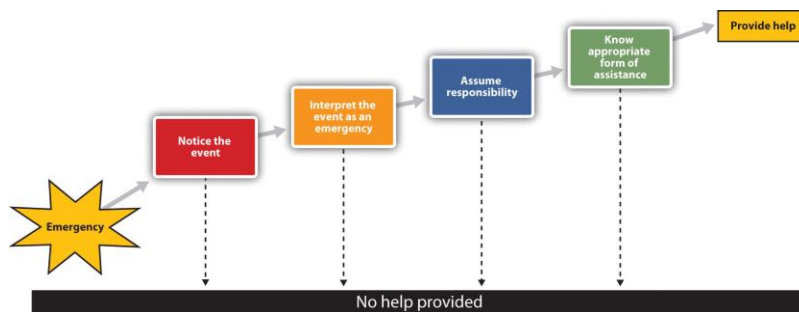


Figure 15.8 Latané & Darley Model.

The Latané and Darley model of helping is based on the idea that a variety of situational factors can influence whether or not we help.

The first step in the model is noticing the event. Latané and Darley (1968) demonstrated the important role of the social situation in noticing by asking research participants to complete a questionnaire in a small room. Some of the participants completed the questionnaire alone, whereas others completed the questionnaire in small groups in which two other participants were also working on questionnaires. A few minutes after the participants had begun the questionnaires, the experimenters started to let some white smoke come into the room through a vent in the wall. The experimenters timed how long it took before the first person in the room looked up and noticed the smoke.

The people who were working alone noticed the smoke in about five seconds, and within four minutes most of the participants who were working alone had taken some action. On the other hand, on average, the first person in the group conditions did not notice the smoke until over 20 seconds had elapsed. And, although 75% of the participants who were working alone reported the smoke within four minutes, the smoke was reported in only 12% of the groups by that time.

In fact, in only three of the eight groups did anyone report the smoke, even after it had filled the room. You can see that the social situation has a powerful influence on noticing; we simply don't see emergencies when other people are with us.

Even if we notice an emergency, we might not interpret it as one. The problem is compounded when others are present, because when we are unsure how to interpret events we normally look to others to help us understand them, and at the same time they are looking to us for information. The problem is that each bystander thinks that other people aren't acting because they don't see an emergency. Believing that the others know something that they don't, each observer concludes that help is not required.

Even if we have noticed the emergency and interpret it as being one, this does not necessarily mean that we will come to the rescue of the other person. We still need to decide that it is our responsibility to do something. The problem is that when we see others around, it is easy to assume that they are going to do something, and that we don't need to do anything ourselves. **Diffusion of responsibility** occurs *when we assume that others will take action and therefore we do not take action ourselves*. The irony again, of course, is that people are more likely to help when they are the only ones in the situation than when there are others around.

Perhaps you have noticed diffusion of responsibility if you participated in an Internet users' group where people asked questions of the other users. Did you find that it was easier to get help if you directed your request to a smaller set of users than when you directed it to a larger number of people? Markey (2000) found that people received help more quickly (in about 37 seconds) when they asked for help by specifying a participant's name than when no name was specified (51 seconds).

The final step in the helping model is knowing how to help. Of course, for many of us the ways to best help another person in an emergency are not that clear; we are not professionals and we have little training in how to help in emergencies. People who do have training in how to act in emergencies are more likely to help, whereas the rest of us just don't know what to do, and therefore we may simply walk by. On the other hand, today many people have cell phones, and we can do a lot with a quick call.

Human Aggression: An Adaptive Yet Potentially Damaging Behaviour

Aggression is *behaviour that is intended to harm another individual*. Aggression may occur in the heat of the moment, for instance, when a jealous lover strikes out in rage or the sports fans at a university light fires and destroy cars after an important basketball game. Or it may occur in a more cognitive, deliberate, and planned way, such as the aggression of a bully who steals another child's toys, a terrorist who kills civilians to gain political exposure, or a hired assassin who kills for money.

Not all aggression is physical. Aggression also occurs in nonphysical ways, as when children exclude others from activities, call them names, or spread rumours about them. Paquette and

Underwood (1999) found that both boys and girls rated nonphysical aggression such as name-calling as making them feel more “sad and bad” than physical aggression did.

The Ability to Aggress Is Part of Human Nature

We may aggress against others in part because it allows us to gain access to valuable resources such as food, territory, and desirable mates, or to protect ourselves from direct attack by others. If aggression helps in the survival of our genes, then the process of natural selection may well have caused humans, as it would any other animal, to be aggressive (Buss & Duntley, 2006).

There is evidence for the genetics of aggression. Aggression is controlled in large part by the amygdala. One of the primary functions of the amygdala is to help us learn to associate stimuli with the rewards and the punishment that they may provide. The amygdala is particularly activated in our responses to stimuli that we see as threatening and fear-arousing. When the amygdala is stimulated, in either humans or in animals, the organism becomes more aggressive.

But just because we can aggress does not mean that we will aggress. It is not necessarily evolutionarily adaptive to aggress in all situations. Neither people nor animals are always aggressive; they rely on aggression only when they feel that they absolutely need to (Berkowitz, 1993a). The prefrontal cortex serves as a control centre on aggression; when it is more highly activated, we are more able to control our aggressive impulses. Research has found that the cerebral cortex is less active in murderers and death row inmates, suggesting that violent crime may be caused at least in part by a failure or reduced ability to regulate aggression (Davidson, Putnam, & Larson, 2000)

Hormones are also important in regulating aggression. Most important in this regard is the male sex hormone testosterone, which is associated with increased aggression in both males and females. Research conducted on a variety of animals has found a positive correlation between levels of testosterone and aggression. This relationship seems to be weaker among humans than among animals, yet it is still significant (Dabbs, Hargrove, & Heusel, 1996).

Consuming alcohol increases the likelihood that people will respond aggressively to provocations, and even people who are not normally aggressive may react with aggression when they are intoxicated (Graham, Osgood, Wells, & Stockwell, 2006). Alcohol reduces the ability of people who have consumed it to inhibit their aggression because when people are intoxicated, they become more self-focused and less aware of the social constraints that normally prevent them from engaging aggressively (Bushman & Cooper, 1990; Steele & Southwick, 1985).

Negative Experiences Increase Aggression

If I were to ask you about the times that you have been aggressive, I bet that you would tell me that many of them occurred when you were angry, in a bad mood, tired, in pain, sick, or frustrated. And you would be right — we are much more likely to aggress when we are experiencing negative emotions. One important determinant of aggression is frustration. When we are frustrated we may lash out at others, even at people who did not cause the frustration. In

some cases the aggression is **displaced aggression**, which is *aggression that is directed at an object or person other than the person who caused the frustration*.

Other negative emotions also increase aggression. Griffit and Veitch (1971) had students complete questionnaires in rooms in which the heat was at a normal temperature or in which the temperature was over 30 degrees Celsius. The students in the latter conditions expressed significantly more hostility. Aggression is greater on hot days than it is on cooler days and during hot years than during cooler years, and most violent riots occur during the hottest days of the year (Bushman, Wang, & Anderson, 2005). Pain also increases aggression (Berkowitz, 1993b).

If we are aware that we are feeling negative emotions, we might think that we could release those emotions in a relatively harmless way, such as by punching a pillow or kicking something, with the hopes that doing so will release our aggressive tendencies. **Catharsis** — *the idea that observing or engaging in less harmful aggressive actions will reduce the tendency to aggress later in a more harmful way* — has been considered by many as a way of decreasing violence, and it was an important part of the theories of Sigmund Freud.

As far as social psychologists have been able to determine, however, catharsis simply does not work. Rather than decreasing aggression, engaging in aggressive behaviours of any type increases the likelihood of later aggression. Bushman, Baumeister, and Stack (1999) first angered their research participants by having another student insult them. Then half of the participants were allowed to engage in a cathartic behaviour: they were given boxing gloves and then got a chance to hit a punching bag for two minutes. Then all the participants played a game with the person who had insulted them earlier in which they had a chance to blast the other person with a painful blast of white noise. Contrary to the catharsis hypothesis, the students who had punched the punching bag set a higher noise level and delivered longer bursts of noise than the participants who did not get a chance to hit the punching bag. It seems that if we hit a punching bag, punch a pillow, or scream as loud as we can to release our frustration, the opposite may occur — rather than decreasing aggression, these behaviours in fact increase it.

Viewing Violent Media Increases Aggression

The average North American watches over four hours of television every day, and these programs contain a substantial amount of aggression. At the same time, children are also exposed to violence in movies and video games, as well as in popular music and music videos that include violent lyrics and imagery. Research evidence makes it very clear that, on average, people who watch violent behaviour become more aggressive. The evidence supporting this relationship comes from many studies conducted over many years using both correlational designs as well as laboratory studies in which people have been randomly assigned to view either violent or nonviolent material (Anderson et al., 2003). Viewing violent behaviour also increases aggression in part through observational learning. Children who witness violence are more likely to be aggressive. One example is in the studies of Albert Bandura, as shown in this video.



This video shows Professor Albert Bandura describing his studies on the observational learning of aggression in children.

[Watch: "Aggression in Children" \[YouTube\]:](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWsxfoJEwQQ)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWsxfoJEwQQ>

Another outcome of viewing large amounts of violent material is **desensitization**, which is *the tendency over time to show weaker emotional responses to emotional stimuli*. When we first see violence, we are likely to be shocked, aroused, and even repulsed by it. However, over time, as we see more and more violence, we become habituated to it, such that the subsequent exposures produce fewer and fewer negative emotional responses. Continually viewing violence also makes us more distrustful and more likely to behave aggressively (Bartholow, Bushman, & Sestir, 2006; Nabi & Sullivan, 2001).

Of course, not everyone who views violent material becomes aggressive; individual differences also matter. People who experience a lot of negative affect and who feel that they are frequently rejected by others whom they care about are more aggressive (Downey, Irwin, Ramsay, & Ayduk, 2004). People with inflated or unstable self-esteem are more prone to anger and are highly aggressive when their high self-image is threatened (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). For instance, classroom bullies are those children who always want to be the centre of attention, who think a lot of themselves, and who cannot take criticism (Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002). Bullies are highly motivated to protect their inflated self-concepts, and they react with anger and aggression when it is threatened.

There is a culturally universal tendency for men to be more physically violent than women (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Crick & Nelson, 2002). Worldwide, about 99% of rapes and about 90% of robberies, assaults, and murders are committed by men (Graham & Wells, 2001). These sex differences do not imply that women are never aggressive. Both men and women respond to insults and provocation with aggression; the differences between men and women are smaller after they have been frustrated, insulted, or threatened (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996).

Research Focus: The Culture of Honour

In addition to differences across cultures, there are also regional differences in the incidence and acceptance of violence. One explanation for these differences is variation in cultural norms about the appropriate reactions to threats against one's social status. These cultural differences

apply primarily to men. In short, some men react more violently than others when they believe that others are threatening them.

*The social norm that condones and even encourages responding to insults with aggression is known as the **culture of honour**.* The culture of honour leads people to view even relatively minor conflicts or disputes as challenges to one's social status and reputation and can therefore trigger aggressive responses. Work by anthropologists, historians, sociologists, criminologists, social psychologists, and others reveals several shared characteristics among cultures of honour in which actors compete for status based on physical force. One common factor is that honour is a central source of status. Honour cultures are typically antipathetic to law and legal officials: a man must stand up for himself and not rely on others to do so. Traditional honour cultures tend to be highly patriarchal, subordinating women and treating their sexuality as family property. In such cultures, a second type of honour violence may be found — men beating or even killing their female relatives for loss of chastity or other conduct that threatens male rule. These cultural beliefs are concentrated in predominately Muslim nations and among their emigrants to Western countries.

There can also be regional differences that impact the culture of honour. For example, whether a man is a farmer who grows crops or raises livestock, might affect his behaviour. Unlike crops, herds are mobile and vulnerable to theft, and it is difficult for law enforcement officials to protect them. To be successful in an environment where theft was common, a man had to build a reputation for strength and toughness, and this was accomplished by a willingness to use swift, and sometimes violent, punishment against thieves (Stewart, 1994).

In one series of experiment studying the concept of honour culture, Cohen, Nisbett, Bosdle, and Schwarz (1996) investigated how white male students who had grown up either in the northern or in the southern regions of the United States, and been raised in a culture of honour, responded to insults. The experiments, which were conducted at the University of Michigan, involved an encounter in which the research participant was walking down a narrow hallway. The experimenters enlisted the help of a confederate who did not give way to the participant but rather bumped into him and insulted him. Compared with students with no culture of honour beliefs (raised in the northern U.S.), students from culture of honour regions (raised in the southern U.S.) who had been bumped were more likely to think that their masculine reputations had been threatened, exhibited greater physiological signs of being upset, had higher testosterone levels, engaged in more aggressive and dominant behaviour (e.g., gave firmer handshakes), and were less willing to yield to a subsequent confederate (Figure 15.9, “Culture of Honour Research”).

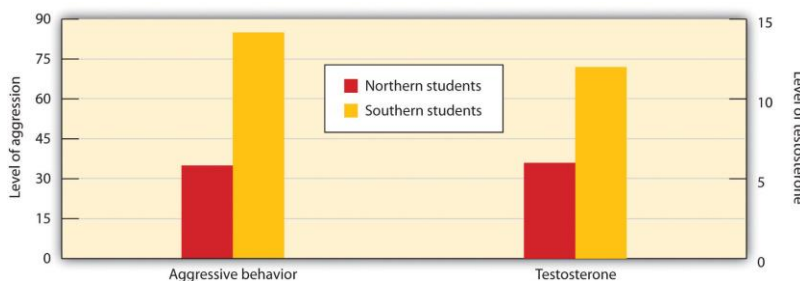


Figure 15.9 Culture of Honour Research. Students from an honour culture (southern U.S.) expressed more anger and had greater levels

of testosterone after being insulted than did students from a non honour culture (northern U.S.). [\[Long Description\]](#)

Conformity and Obedience: How Social Influence Creates Social Norms

When we decide on what courses to enroll in by asking for advice from our friends, change our beliefs or behaviours as a result of the ideas that we hear from others, or binge drink because our friends are doing it, we are engaging in **conformity**, *a change in beliefs or behaviour that occurs as the result of the presence of the other people around us*. We conform not only because we believe that other people have accurate information and we want to have knowledge (**informational conformity**) but also *because we want to be liked by others* (**normative conformity**).

The typical outcome of conformity is that our beliefs and behaviours become more similar to those of others around us. But some situations create more conformity than others, and some of the factors that contribute to conformity are shown in Table 15.4, “Variables That Increase Conformity.”

Table 15.4 Variables that Increase Conformity.^[2]

[\[Skip Table\]](#)

Variable	Description	Example
Number in majority	As the number of people who are engaging in a behaviour increases, the tendency to conform to those people also increases.	People are more likely to stop and look up in the air when many, rather than few, people are also looking up (Milgram, Bickman, & Berkowitz, 1969).
Unanimity	Conformity reduces sharply when any one person deviates from the norm.	In Solomon Asch’s line-matching research (1955), when any one person gave a different answer, conformity was eliminated.
Status and authority	People who have higher status, such as those in authority, create more conformity.	Milgram (1974) found that conformity in his obedience studies was greatly reduced when the person giving the command to shock was described as an “ordinary man” rather than a scientist at Yale University.

At times conformity occurs in a relatively spontaneous and unconscious way, without any obvious intent of one person to change the other, or an awareness that the conformity is occurring. Robert Cialdini and his colleagues (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990) found that university students were more likely to throw litter on the ground themselves when they had just seen another person throw some paper on the ground, and Cheng and Chartrand (2003) found that people unconsciously mimicked the behaviours of others, such as by rubbing their face or

shaking their foot, and that that mimicry was greater when the other person was of high versus low social status.

Muzafer Sherif (1936) studied how norms develop in ambiguous situations. In his studies, university students were placed in a dark room with a single point of light and were asked to indicate, each time the light was turned on, how much it appeared to move. (The movement, which is not actually real, occurs because of the saccadic movement of the eyes.) Each group member gave his or her response on each trial aloud and each time in a different random order. As you can see in Figure 15.10, “Studies on Conformity,” Sherif found a conformity effect: over time, the responses of the group members became more and more similar to each other such that after four days they converged on a common norm. When the participants were interviewed after the study, they indicated that they had not realized that they were conforming.

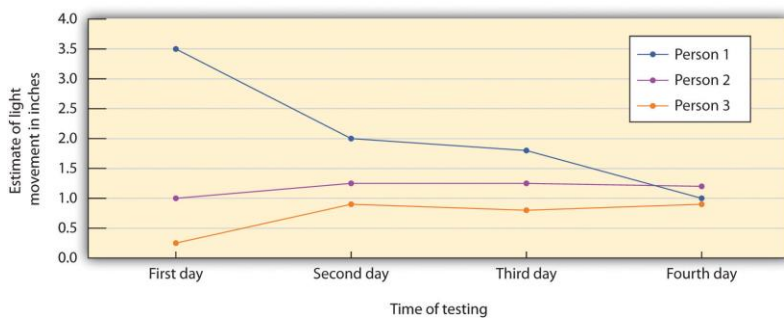
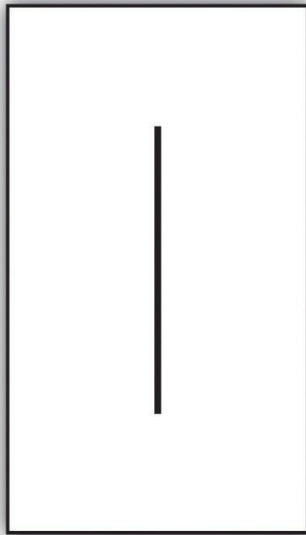


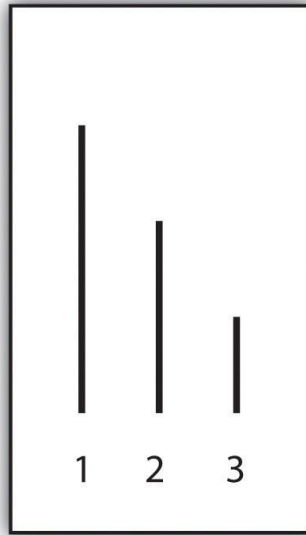
Figure 15.10 Studies on Conformity.

The participants in the studies by Muzafer Sherif initially had different beliefs about the degree to which a point of light appeared to be moving. (You can see these differences as expressed on Day 1.) However, as they shared their beliefs with other group members over several days, a common group norm developed. Shown here are the estimates made by a group of three participants who met together on four different days.

Not all conformity is passive. In the research of Solomon Asch (1955) the judgments that group members were asked to make were entirely unambiguous, and the influence of the other people on judgments was apparent. The research participants were male university students who were told that they were to be participating in a test of visual abilities. The men were seated in front of a board that displayed the visual stimuli that they were going to judge. The men were told that there would be 18 trials during the experiment, and on each trial they would see two cards. The standard card had a single line that was to be compared to the three lines on the test card, which varied in length between about 5 and 25 centimeters (Figure 15.11, “Standard & Test Cards.”).



Standard card



Test card

Figure 15.11 Standard & Test Cards.

The standard card has a single line that was to be judged, and the test card has three lines that varied in length between about 5 and 25 centimetres.

On each trial, each person in the group answered out loud, beginning with one end of the group and moving toward the other end. Although the real research participant did not know it, the other group members were actually not participants but experimental confederates who gave predetermined answers on each trial. Because the real participant was seated next to last in the row, he always made his judgment following most of the other group members. Although on the first two trials the confederates each gave the correct answer, on the third trial, and on 11 of the subsequent trials, they all had been instructed to give the same wrong choice. For instance, even though the correct answer was Line 1, they would all say it was Line 2. Thus when it became the participant's turn to answer, he could either give the clearly correct answer or conform to the incorrect responses of the confederates.

Remarkably, in this study about 76% of the 123 men who were tested gave at least one incorrect response when it was their turn, and 37% of the responses, overall, were conforming. This is indeed evidence for the power of conformity because the participants were making clearly incorrect responses in public. However, conformity was not absolute; in addition to the 24% of the men who never conformed, only 5% of the men conformed on all 12 of the critical trials.



Watch this video to see a demonstration of Asch's line studies.

[Watch: “Asch’s Line Matching Studies” \[YouTube\]:](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRh5qy09nNw)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRh5qy09nNw>

The tendency to conform to those in authority, known as **obedience**, was demonstrated in a remarkable set of studies performed by Stanley Milgram (1974). Milgram designed a study in which he could observe the extent to which a person who presented himself as an authority would be able to produce obedience, even to the extent of leading people to cause harm to others. Like many other researchers who were interested in conformity, Milgram’s interest stemmed in part from his desire to understand how the presence of a powerful social situation — in this case the directives of Adolph Hitler, the German dictator who ordered the killing of millions of Jews and other “undesirable” people during World War II — could produce obedience.

Milgram used newspaper ads to recruit men (and in one study, women) from a wide variety of backgrounds to participate in his research. When the research participant arrived at the lab, he or she was introduced to a man who was ostensibly another research participant but who actually was a confederate working with the experimenter as part of the experimental team. The experimenter explained that the goal of the research was to study the effects of punishment on learning. After the participant and the confederate both consented to be in the study, the researcher explained that one of them would be the teacher, and the other the learner. They were each given a slip of paper and asked to open it and indicate what it said. In fact both papers read “teacher,” which allowed the confederate to pretend that he had been assigned to be the learner and thus to assure that the actual participant was always the teacher.

While the research participant (now the teacher) looked on, the learner was taken into the adjoining shock room and strapped to an electrode that was to deliver the punishment. The experimenter explained that the teacher’s job would be to sit in the control room and read a list of word pairs to the learner. After the teacher read the list once, it would be the learner’s job to remember which words went together. For instance, if the word pair was “blue sofa,” the teacher would say the word “blue” on the testing trials, and the learner would have to indicate which of four possible words (“house,” “sofa,” “cat,” or “carpet”) was the correct answer by pressing one of four buttons in front of him.

After the experimenter gave the teacher a mild shock to demonstrate that the shocks really were painful, the experiment began. The research participant first read the list of words to the learner and then began the testing. The shock apparatus (Figure 15.12, “Materials Used in Milgram’s Experiments on Obedience”) was in front of the teacher, and the learner was not visible in the shock room. The experimenter sat behind the teacher and explained that each time the learner made a mistake the teacher was to press one of the shock switches to administer the shock. Moreover, the switch that was to be pressed increased by one level with each mistake, so that each mistake required a stronger shock.

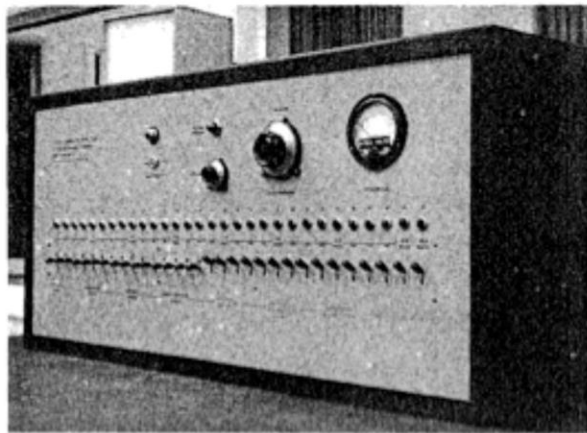
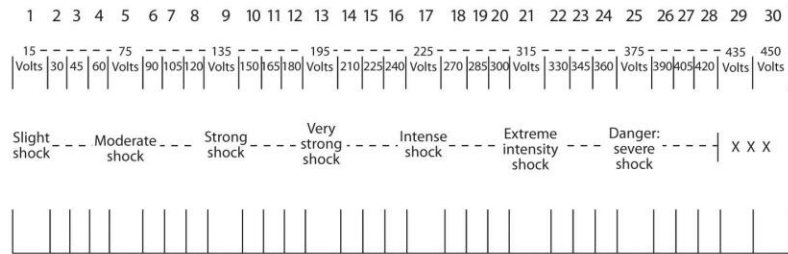


Figure 15.12 Materials Used in Milgram’s Experiments on Obedience.

Once the learner (who was, of course, actually the experimental confederate) was alone in the shock room, he unstrapped himself from the shock machine and brought out a tape recorder that he used to play a prerecorded series of responses that the teacher could hear through the wall of the room.

The teacher heard the learner say “ugh!” after the first few shocks. After the next few mistakes, when the shock level reached 150 V, the learner was heard to exclaim, “Let me out of here. I have heart trouble!” As the shock reached about 270 V, the protests of the learner became more vehement, and after 300 V the learner proclaimed that he was not going to answer any more questions. From 330 V and up, the learner was silent. At this point the experimenter responded to participants’ questions, if any, with a scripted response indicating that they should continue reading the questions and applying increasing shock when the learner did not respond.

The results of Milgram’s research were themselves quite shocking. Although all the participants gave the initial mild levels of shock, responses varied after that. Some refused to continue after about 150 V, despite the insistence of the experimenter to continue to increase the shock level. Still others, however, continued to present the questions and to administer the shocks, under the pressure of the experimenter, who demanded that they continue. In the end, 65% of the participants continued giving the shock to the learner all the way up to the 450 V maximum, even though that shock was marked as “danger: severe shock” and no response had been heard from the participant for several trials. In other words, well over half of the men who participated

had, as far as they knew, shocked another person to death, all as part of a supposed experiment on learning.

In case you are thinking that such high levels of obedience would not be observed in today's modern culture, there is fact evidence that they would. Milgram's findings were almost exactly replicated, using men and women from a wide variety of ethnic groups, in a study conducted in the first decade of this century at Santa Clara University (Burger, 2009). In this replication of the Milgram experiment, 67% of the men and 73% of the women agreed to administer increasingly painful electric shocks when an authority figure ordered them to. The participants in this study were not, however, allowed to go beyond the 150 V shock switch.

Although it might be tempting to conclude that Burger's and Milgram's experiments demonstrate that people are innately bad creatures who are ready to shock others to death, this is not in fact the case. Rather it is the social situation, and not the people themselves, that is responsible for the behaviour. When Milgram created variations on his original procedure, he found that changes in the situation dramatically influenced the amount of conformity. Conformity was significantly reduced when people were allowed to choose their own shock level rather than being ordered to use the level required by the experimenter, when the experimenter communicated by phone rather than from within the experimental room, and when other research participants refused to give the shock. These findings are consistent with a basic principle of social psychology: the situation in which people find themselves has a major influence on their behaviour.

Do We Always Conform?

The research that we have discussed to this point suggests that most people conform to the opinions and desires of others. But it is not always the case that we blindly conform. For one, there are individual differences in conformity. People with lower self-esteem are more likely to conform than are those with higher self-esteem, and people who are dependent on and who have a strong need for approval from others are also more conforming (Bornstein, 1993). People who highly identify with or who have a high degree of commitment to a group are also more likely to conform to group norms than those who care less about the group (Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1997). Despite these individual differences among people in terms of their tendency to conform, however, research has generally found that the impact of individual difference variables on conformity is smaller than the influence of situational variables, such as the number and unanimity of the majority.

We have seen that conformity usually occurs such that the opinions and behaviours of individuals become more similar to the opinions and behaviours of the majority of the people in the group. However, and although it is much more unusual, there are cases *in which a smaller number of individuals is able to influence the opinions or behaviours of the larger group* — a phenomenon known as **minority influence**. Minorities who are consistent and confident in their opinions may in some cases be able to be persuasive (Moscovici, Mugny, & Van Avermaet, 1985).

Persuasion that comes from minorities has another, and potentially even more important, effect on the opinions of majority group members: it can lead majorities to engage in fuller, as well as

more divergent, innovative, and creative thinking about the topics being discussed (Martin, Hewstone, Martin, & Gardikiotis, 2008). Nemeth and Kwan (1987) found that participants working together in groups solved problems more creatively when only one person gave a different and unusual response than the other members did (minority influence) in comparison to when three people gave the same unusual response.

It is a good thing that minorities can be influential; otherwise, the world would be pretty boring indeed. When we look back on history, we find that it is the unusual, divergent, innovative minority groups or individuals, who — although frequently ridiculed at the time for their unusual ideas — end up being respected for producing positive changes.

Another case where conformity does not occur is when people feel that their freedom is being threatened by influence attempts, yet they also have the ability to resist that persuasion. In these cases they may develop *a strong emotional reaction that leads people to resist pressures to conform*, known as **psychological reactance** (Miron & Brehm, 2006). Reactance is aroused when our ability to choose which behaviours to engage in is eliminated or threatened with elimination. The outcome of the experience of reactance is that people may not conform at all, in fact moving their opinions or behaviours away from the desires of the influencer. Consider an experiment conducted by Pennebaker and Sanders (1976), who attempted to get people to stop writing graffiti on the walls of campus restrooms. In the first group of restrooms they put a sign that read “Do not write on these walls under any circumstances!” whereas in the second group they placed a sign that simply said “Please don’t write on these walls.” Two weeks later, the researchers returned to the restrooms to see if the signs had made a difference. They found that there was significantly less graffiti in the second group of restrooms than in the first one. It seems as if people who were given strong pressures to not engage in the behaviour were more likely to react against those directives than were people who were given a weaker message.

Reactance represents a desire to restore freedom that is being threatened. A child who feels that his or her parents are forcing him to eat his asparagus may react quite vehemently with a strong refusal to touch the plate. And an adult who feels that she is being pressured by a car salesperson might feel the same way and leave the showroom entirely, resulting in the opposite of the salesperson’s intended outcome.

Key Takeaways

- Altruism is behaviour that is designed to increase another person’s welfare, and particularly those actions that do not seem to provide a direct reward to the person who performs them. The tendency to help others in need is in part a functional evolutionary adaptation and in part determined by environmental factors.
- Although helping others can be costly to us as individuals, helping people who are related to us can perpetuate our own genes. Some helping is based on reciprocal altruism, the principle that if we help other people now, they will return the favour should we need their help in the future.
- We also learn to help through modelling and reinforcement. The result of this learning is norms about helping, including the reciprocity norm and the social responsibility norm.
- Research testing the Latané and Darley model of helping has shown the importance of the social situation in noticing, interpreting, and acting in emergency situations.

- Aggression is physical or nonphysical behaviour that is intended to harm another individual. Aggression has both genetic and environmental causes. The experience of negative emotions tends to increase aggression.
- Viewing violence tends to increase aggression.
- The social norm that condones and even encourages responding to insults with aggression is known as the culture of honour.
- Conformity, the change in beliefs or behaviour that occurs as the result of the presence of the other people around us, can occur in both active and passive ways. The typical outcome of conformity is that our beliefs and behaviours become more similar to those of others around us.
- The situation is the most powerful determinant of conformity, but individual differences may also matter. The important influence of the social situation on conformity was demonstrated in the research by Sherif, Asch, Milgram, and others.
- Minority influence can change attitudes and change how majorities process information.

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