

Try It Yourself (page 366)

Have you ever asked any of the following questions?

- Do you find the tests in this course hard?
- What should I wear to the party?
- What do you think I should do?
- Which CD would you recommend?
- Do you think that is a good restaurant?

In all of these cases, you are looking for social input to help you make decisions. Whether you follow the advice given by anyone is, of course, up to you, but social influence is a part of the decision-making process for most of us. Are you more likely to be influenced by some people than others? For example, consider how you dress: Are you a 'preppy'? A 'Goth'? Is there another term that fits? What does this tell you about social influence? Do you consider being influenced by others either bad or good? Why?

Social influence may be either good or bad. Clearly it is bad when a teenager drinks alcohol and drives a car at high speeds at the urging of peers. It may also be bad when we rely on the opinions of others to such a great extent that we seem incapable of making our own decisions. But it can be good as well: in the first place, sometimes it provides us with needed information. For example, it may help us problem-solve if asking for advice gives us ideas for possible solutions that we didn't come up with on our own or stimulates us to think about a problem from a different perspective. In considering our personal 'style' (i.e., how we dress), social influence may be good or bad. If we adopt a style in order to fit in with a particular group (e.g., preppy or 'Goth'), we often find that we are stereotyped as holding all the same opinions and values as the group (although the actual

opinions and values in the group inevitably vary widely). This may be uncomfortable for some of us and lead us to feel that we are misunderstood or even discriminated against by others. Conforming in order to fit in may also prevent us from thinking for ourselves and developing our own unique identities. Then again, if conforming to a group's dress code allows us to strengthen our own identities that have already been formed, to feel comfortable with like-minded people, and to increase our sense of belonging in society, social influence may not be such a bad thing. If it helps us to avoid mistakes or dangers, it is clearly useful (take, for example, the person who is opposed to the use of illegal narcotics and strives to belong to a group that thinks the same). Social influence is an inevitable part of civilization. We influence each other in making it possible for large numbers of disparate people to live and work together in relative harmony. For instance, simple rules of courtesy are agreed-upon norms in most societies and we influence each other to be polite, in whatever way our society deems appropriate. In this way, we function more happily and more effectively, with clear-cut expectations upon us and boundaries which we and others may not overstep.

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"You would be so pretty if you lost some weight."

"Gee, that's a pretty smart idea coming from somebody like you!"

"Now that your head is shaved, I can see that you really do have a funny-shaped head."

Are these statements of aggression? Does deliberately embarrassing someone constitute aggression? If you *imagine* embarrassing someone, but don't actually do so, are you being aggressive?

Freud would likely call verbal taunts *symbolic aggression*. Do you agree that such behaviour is aggressive? Would you be willing to make similar interpretations about other forms of behaviour, such as love? Why or why not?

Whether or not we judge the statements as aggressive or not is a matter of personal experience and our own style. For example, if we have learned (from family or peers, perhaps) to make jokes by using insults, we may see these comments as signifying something other than aggression. But for many people, who do not have this style or humour, the result is hurtful and fits the definition of aggression in this way at least. If we didn't intend to hurt someone ("It was just a joke!"), is it still aggression? Freud would say that jokes based on insults are aggressive and that we must have wished to inflict pain unconsciously; we don't realize that because we have repressed our aggressive feelings! As indicated in the text, of course, there are serious problems in Freud's logic which seems to be circular. The issue of intent is important in a court of law, for example, as in many other situations in life, but intent is something we have to rely on self-reports for, knowing that the person giving the self-report may not realize his or her own intent. We do make similar interpretations about other behaviours: for instance, we infer love from a wide variety of behaviours, and perhaps rightly so, although the potential for error is high. A parent staying up at night to make a favourite birthday cake for a child is probably showing symbolic love (or then again, the parent may be feeling that he or she "has to" make the cake and may be resentful!).

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Many cultures have blatant expectations that one gender (generally boys) will behave in aggressive ways, and even have sayings such as "Boys will be boys." Indeed, in some cases, boys who do *not* behave aggressively in some situations are looked upon with doubt. Do you think that one gender is more predisposed than the other to be aggressive? Does your answer depend on your definition of aggression? Do you think boys and girls can be aggressive in different ways? If you do see differences between the genders, do you think a non-biological explanation is possible?

Many of the arguments offered by Lorenz and other biological researchers are based on analogies to animal behaviour. In what ways do you think such analogies are or are not appropriate in trying to explain aggression?

As indicated in the text, there is reason to believe that there is a physiological reason why many boys seem to be more aggressive than girls, but this refers mainly to physical aggression. What about verbal aggression? It is often reported that girls can be more verbally aggressive than boys, perhaps due in part to their earlier development of language skills. But perhaps this is not really the case at all: consider the possibility that verbal aggression may be the only (semi-)sanctioned form of aggression allowed to females in our society. Certainly there is greater disapproval for a physically aggressive girl than for a physically aggressive boy. This might indicate that boys and girls are equally aggressive, but only manifest their aggressiveness in ways that society permits. Or perhaps, once again, nature and nurture interact.

Animal analogies must be considered with caution: while we human beings occupy a place among our fellow mammals, we are unique in the fact that learning plays a much

stronger part in our behaviours than in that of any other animal. In the case of aggression, we must be careful that we do not use a possible biological base to excuse behaviour that harms others.

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Have there been any times in your life when you have been reinforced for acting aggressively? What was the reinforcer? Have you observed other people being reinforced for aggressive behaviour? Can you identify the reinforcers they received? Would you ever reinforce someone for being aggressive? If so, under what conditions? Under what conditions would you punish aggressive behaviour? If aggression is sometimes instrumental, do you think that aggressive behaviour can ever be eliminated?

Most of us have acted in an aggressive fashion at some time, and found that we received what we wanted when we behaved in this way. We often forget the times when such behaviour does not get us what we want, especially if we see aggression reinforced in others! Have you heard of assertiveness training? Many people assume this kind of training is only for people who constantly acquiesce to others, without making their own wants and needs known. But assertiveness training is used in helping aggressive people behave more acceptably in society as well. Assertiveness refers to behaviours which allow the person to make their opinions, wants and needs clear to others in a forthright manner, without infringing on the rights of others (this is what sets assertiveness apart from aggressiveness). If assertiveness can be used instrumentally to help people get what they want, the need for aggression is diminished. Can aggressive behaviour be eliminated from society? That's another question and might require a substantial change in the way society views aggression.

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Newscasts and newspapers often pay detailed attention to fighting in professional sports, such as replays of fights in a sports broadcast. What effect do you think this might have on young and amateur athletes? Will they be more likely to get into fights? If so, how would you explain this in cognitive terms? How would the cognitive approach suggest that fighting in professional sports be handled by the media? What could parents do so that their children who view these incidents don't become violent themselves?

The cognitive approach regards watching the behaviours and consequences of those behaviours as instances of observational learning. If young or amateur athletes watch highly regarded professional athletes behave in an aggressive manner, the cognitive approach suggests that their behaviours will become more aggressive as well. The consequences of behaviour must be examined as well. If a young person sees aggressive behaviour by an athlete result in minor negative consequences (3 minutes in the penalty box, for example) and major positive consequences (praise and admiration from teammates or sports commentators), the aggressive behaviour is more likely to be imitated, says the cognitive approach. According to this approach, it would be better if the media either refused to show the aggressive behaviour and positive consequences for it and emphasised the negative consequences, while spotlighting sportsmanlike play. Parents would be well-advised to discuss with their children the negative consequences of aggressive behaviour that their children witness, while giving praise and admiration for viewed instances of good sportsmanship.

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Think about exciting action films or television programmes you have seen. How did you feel afterwards? Did you feel calm and content? Did you feel excited and aroused? Pay attention to how you feel the next time you see an action movie. Do your impressions support the concept of catharsis? Do you think that the idea of catharsis might be applicable to any other situations? For example, do you think that watching a sad movie would help you cope with a sad situation in your own life? Or would it make you feel sadder?

Reactions to films tend to be very individual, but for the most part, catharsis doesn't seem to occur. In fact, it is more likely that watching a movie that reflects our current feelings tends to intensify those feelings, at least for a little while. So, if you feel depressed or ill, you would be well-advised to watch a comedy rather than a tragedy; if you have been bereaved, a movie containing scenes of death and grief might not be the best choice. But if you are in love, romantic comedies and movies with 'happily ever after' endings might be just what you enjoy the most!

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Imagine that you are raising a child. Based on the humanistic view, what would you do to ensure the child did not grow up to be aggressive? What does the humanistic view suggest to you about reducing violence within society? Is it about changing the person, or changing society?

Since Maslow regards aggression as the result of deprivation of deficiency needs, parents should ensure that their children grow up with these needs either met, or give the child the realistic opportunity to meet these needs. That means providing for the child's physical and safety needs, and making sure the child receives love and esteem from the family.

According to Rogers, aggression is the result of incongruence, that is, a conflict between the sense of self and the ideal self. Typically, this arises when other people impose conditions of worth as a requirement for giving positive regard. Similarly, a person may adopt aggressive norms due to the need for positive regard, as might be the case for some young people who live in a milieu in which violence and aggressiveness are prerequisites for respect. The recipe for parents would be to make sure that their children are given plenty of unconditional positive regard: the child's behaviour may sometimes need discipline and correction, but it should always be clear that the child is valued and respected.

Rollo May contends that aggression may be one response to an individual's perceived feeling of powerlessness in the world. Thus, if a person interprets their position as one which they can do nothing to affect, they may decide that their only recourse is to be aggressive in asserting their rights. Parents, he might suggest, should raise their children with choice, allowing as much freedom as the child's age and abilities permit. If children know that they can affect the world, the sense of powerlessness that May describes may not arise.

To reduce violence within society, the humanists would all agree that changes must come within society as a whole. Conditions must be provided for people to feel that they can

fulfil their needs, that they will be valued and respected for their own intrinsic worth, and that they have the power to affect their environment and their own destiny.

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What conclusion do you draw about the relationship between observing violence and aggressive behaviour? Have you played computer/video games which feature graphic violence? How do you feel about the relationship between such games and aggression? Do you think that the age of the viewer or game-player makes a difference? What guidelines would you draw up for parents who are concerned about the effects of viewing violence on their children?

A conservative conclusion might be that viewing violence may increase aggressive behaviour in some people, and in children in particular, may facilitate the formation of schemata in which violent behaviour is regarded as more expected and more acceptable. For adults who have solidly formed schemata about aggressive behaviour as unacceptable, it is unlikely that viewing violence will induce them to behave violently. However, playing video games which feature graphic violence provides further psychological and philosophical questions. Playing such a game requires the player to engage in violent acts. These acts may be confined to a fantasy realm, but they are violent acts. Is committing violent acts in a fantasy realm really so different from committing violent acts in the real world? Or is the difference only one of consequences (i.e., there are no real consequences in the fantasy realm, while the consequences may be very severe and even tragic in the real world)? Answers to these questions depend to a great

extent on one's definition of aggression (i.e., does the outcome matter in the definition?). Parents who are concerned about the effects of viewing violence on their children certainly should reduce or eliminate violent programming for children under the age of 10 or 11 who have not yet attained the cognitive capability to deal with abstract and symbolic thinking and hypothetical situations. In general, the younger the child, the more likely it is that what the child views will affect the schemata and attitudes the child has towards violence, and the behaviour the child subsequently demonstrates. When children do watch aggressive acts, parents should discuss with them the unacceptability of such acts, the potential consequences of these acts, and alternative behaviours that would be more acceptable.

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Most of the interpretations of empathic behaviour suggest that we help others because 'there's something in it for us.' It may be because we anticipate rewards of some kind, such as praise from others, increases in our own sense of esteem, or to reduce our (empathic) suffering. Or, it may be because we are genetically programmed to engage in behaviour that will ultimately benefit our own survival or the propagation of our genes. Thus, most explanations suggest that we intervene for our own benefit, not out of genuine altruism. Consider some possible situations: Some wealthy individuals donate large amounts of money to charities, while making sure that their donations are highly publicised (possibly even expecting a building to be named after them) - but sometimes donations are anonymous. Or, consider that individuals sometimes risk their lives in emergencies, such as running into a burning building to rescue strangers, and report

afterwards that they even didn't think about the risk to themselves. Do you think genuine altruism is possible? Explain why or why not.

This is a completely individual judgment. The existing evidence is not conclusive in deciding whether genuine altruism is possible, so your answer to this question reflects your own worldview and values. In particular, it will reflect your view of what the human being is: good, bad, fickle, unpredictable, selfish, selfless, insecure, arrogant and so on. Now consider what your answer says about you: do you have a tendency to be cynical or idealistic in your view of others? Or are you somewhere in between? Or are you, like so many of us, just confused?

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One of the challenges of researching bystander intervention is a lack of *external validity*—simply put, most of the experimental research involves situations that are not very dangerous or violent, whereas real-world emergencies may well be. So what of situations in which the bystander can readily ascertain that intervention is necessary, but which also pose significant risks? Fischer and his colleagues (2006) performed a study in which low-danger situations were compared to high-danger situations. When the danger seemed low, the usual effect was found: a bystander was more likely to help when alone than when other bystanders were present. Interestingly, when the danger was perceived to be high, the effect disappeared - it didn't matter whether the bystander was alone or with another person. Unfortunately, in the situations considered, no more than 50% of the participants tried to help someone in trouble, no matter what the circumstances. So what can we conclude about real-world helping?

Have you ever encountered an emergency? Did you intervene? Can you relate your behaviour to the principles discussed above? Does knowing these principles seem likely to affect how you will react to future emergencies? (Priming suggests that it should.) If you've never been involved in an emergency, under what conditions do you think you would intervene?

Is it really very surprising that half of the participants in the study discussed did not help when they perceived the danger to be high? Are we expecting too much when we feel disappointed that a bystander does not risk harm to himself/herself in order to help another person? In the real world, it is often very difficult to ascertain how much danger might be involved in helping another person in an emergency. Under these conditions, perhaps people make judgements on the side of caution in overestimating the degree of danger present in a situation in order to avoid harm to themselves. How will you react in an emergency situation? Probably with more helping behaviour than you might have shown before you read this chapter, but then, we never know for sure until we're tested.