

# SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

## MODULE ONE

### SOCIAL INFLUENCE

#### HOW DO SOCIAL NORMS INFLUENCE BEHAVIOUR?

Social norms are unspoken but shared rules of conduct within a particular formal or informal group. In many cases norms serve as helpful guides to appropriate behaviour. Social psychologists distinguish between two kinds of social norms. Descriptive norms describe how people behave in a given situation. Injunctive, or prescriptive, norms describe what people should do in a given situation, meaning the type of behaviour that is approved of in a given situation. People quickly acquire the norms of a new environment even if they do not know the norms when they first enter that environment. In fact, people are most likely to acquire norms when they are in new situations. They look to older and/or more established group members to form their own attitudes and behaviours. Although people are generally motivated to adhere to the norms of their group, at times they make errors in perceiving these norms. The term pluralistic ignorance refers to a misperception that occurs when each individual in the group privately rejects a group's norms but believes that the other members of the group accept these norms. They may go along with the norm because they falsely assume that others' behaviour has a different cause (acceptance of the norm) than one's own behaviour (fear of embarrassment). The pressure to conform to social norms is often very powerful, in part because people who deviate from the norm often experience negative consequences such as embarrassment, awkwardness, and even hostile behaviour from others. Because of the unpleasant consequences of deviating from the norm, we are motivated to learn and adhere to the norms of our group.

#### WHAT FACTORS LEAD TO CONFORMITY?

Conformity can be produced by two distinct types of influence: informational influence and normative influence. Informational influence refers to influence that produces conformity when a person believes that others are correct in their judgements and that person wishes to be similarly correct. This type of influence might occur when you are in a new situation and therefore look to others for accurate information. People use other people's beliefs as a way of getting information about the situation, and believe that these people are correct in their judgements. Private conformity refers to when people change their original view and thus conform because they believe others are right. Normative influence describes influence that produces conformity when a person fears the negative social consequences of appearing deviant. Receiving information about the norms of a group can be enough to influence your behaviour. Public conformity is when people conformed because they wanted to publicly agree with others, even though in reality they realised that their answer was incorrect. Why do people give the wrong answer when they clearly know it is wrong? This represents an attribution crisis for people: first, they must determine why their peers are giving different judgements from their own, and second, they must determine what their own dissent would imply about themselves and their peers. Researchers have investigated factors that influence conformity, including group size, standing alone, demographic variables, and motivation for accuracy.

- *Group size*- as the size of the group increases, so does their impact. After 4-5 people an increase in group size doesn't have a greater effect. A group of three is better at producing conformity than a group of two, but a group of seventeen is not better than a group of ten. The presence of particular group members may also influence conformity. As described by social impact theory, people we are close to have more impact on us than those who are distant. We also conform more in the presence of powerful and vocal group members.
- *Standing alone*- although both the size of the group and the nature of its member's influence rates of conformity, the single biggest predictor of conformity is whether the participant must take the lone deviant position, meaning to stand alone. Even when another person in the group gives another—or more extreme—wrong answer, the pressure to conform is drastically reduced. Even if the person who deviates seems to be incompetent, having anyone else stand up to the majority decreases conformity.