

Making Observations of Psychological Processes in Everyday Life [Student Handout]

[10] Social Psychology

A. Introduction

Everybody knows that we live with other people and although we don't think much about it—an interesting fact in itself—we all know that we are critically dependent upon each other: At first when newborns we

literally die without help from others; in everyday life as adults virtually everything we come in contact with has been produced by other people. As we walk about our minds make decisions and choices all the time about what to do, what not to do and how to do things based on the fact that even if there aren't other people around directly there could and will be.

The rule is that anything that is normal is something we don't notice. Indeed, we Americans pride ourselves on insisting, when asked, that we make up our own minds—or at least that we can when we need to. But the world works the way the world works and innumerable lines of research inform us about how often, how many ways and indeed how relentlessly we are affected by others—sometimes quite directly (just their physical presence alters our thinking, how we feel and what we do); sometimes indirectly (Kahneman found that just putting up a picture of eyes looking at us changes how we behave). Difficult as it may be to know how our minds normally work, perceiving how other people affect us can be even more difficult. Just asking us a question changes our state of mind.

B. Questions to Guide Your (Re)Search

[1] Normative behavior is behavior that follows some set of rules, though usually people don't think about and may not even know that there are rules, let alone what they are or how they came into being. How many norms of behavior can you discern people adhering to by watching ordinary people in everyday life?

[2] Because normal behavior tends to become invisible (we/people do it—we/they don't *think* about it) it is often easiest to perceive what it is they were doing when something gets in the way of doing it. How many examples can you find of people being set up or called upon to *violate* norms? How do they tend to react? What are the circumstances set up such situations? When is it OK—when it is *necessary*—to violate a norm?

[3] The 'rules' of normative behavior being something we use rather than think about using we typically simply roll on along abiding by them, and therefore don't notice them. But put us in situations where there are conflicting imperatives ('be respectful to the cop who has just stopped you arbitrarily' and also 'stand up for your rights and don't let yourself be abused') and we find ourselves in a fix. How many situations like that can you detect people experiencing in real life, the media or the movies? Are there patterns to them that make them predictable? How do people become aware of such conflicts? How do they respond to them? How do others respond to their responses?

Key Concepts

- Normative Influences (prescriptive, descriptive)
- Conformity
- Cognitive dissonance
- Bystander Effect
- Prejudice & Stereotyping; Stereotype Effect
- Fundamental Attribution Error

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