PLURALISTIC IGNORANCE

Pluralistic ignorance refers to widespread misperception of the attitudes and behaviors prevalent in one’s group due to public misrepresentation of private attitudes. It can lead to conformity to apparent social norms in the absence of actual private support by individuals. In the extreme case, it can lead every individual to believe that he or she is alone in holding an attitude or in practicing a behavior, when in reality every other group member does the same in private. Pluralistic ignorance is typically measured by asking individuals to indicate on a numerical scale how strongly they agree with a statement or how often they engage in a behavior, and then asking them to estimate how much their peers on average espouse the attitude or perform the behavior; the difference between the perceived consensus and the aggregate of individual ratings captures pluralistic ignorance. This entry looks at how pluralistic ignorance is expressed and then discusses its causes and consequences.

A Ubiquitous Social Phenomenon

Many examples of pluralistic ignorance have been documented in small ad hoc groups. When individuals witness an emergency in the presence of others, they are less likely to offer help than when no other bystanders are present (bystander nonintervention), in part because when they are trying to understand the situation, they stay impassive, but they mistakenly interpret other people’s impassivity as evidence that the situation is not an emergency—a vicious circle leading to less assistance. In a classroom, students confused by a teacher’s utterances often mistake their peers’ silence for comprehension, and, as a result, a majority of students stay silent and confused, not realizing that no one else understands the material (the classroom problem). When discussing an issue about which they initially shared moderate attitudes, group members typically become more extreme (group polarization), in part because deviant thoughts are suppressed, and discussants think that everyone else is more extreme than they are. This phenomenon leads groups, in some cases, to a course of action that virtually no member privately supports, again because misgivings are kept under wraps, even if the misgivings are shared by all (one cause of groupthink) or because everyone erroneously believes that they are pleasing everyone else (the Abilene paradox).

Pluralistic ignorance also explains the persistence of existing social norms in established social groups, which sometimes espouse norms that very
few members actually support in private. Thus, members of a campus fraternity were found to resist progressive admission policies that they privately approved because of the false assumption that the rest of the group did not approve of the policies. A majority of incoming college students believe that they are uniquely uncomfortable with heavy drinking, but they keep these misgivings to themselves, sustaining the illusion and leading some to drink excessively in order to match the imaginary heavy-drinking norm. Youth gang members believe that their peers support violence and crime more than they do, which explains the maintenance of deviant gang norms despite individual misgivings. Similarly, both prison guards and inmates believe that their peers hold attitudes much more antagonistic to the other group than those attitudes really are, explaining the maintenance of unnecessarily violent norms.

On a more global scale, pluralistic ignorance explains rapid societal changes, either because a seeming consensus is revealed to have had little real support by individuals (conservative lag) or because a minority is able to impose the appearance of consensus on a majority (liberal leap). Conservative lags explain why measures no longer supported by a majority live on until they are suddenly revealed to have little foundation. The dramatic fall of European Soviet-inspired regimes at the end of the 20th century illustrates this phenomenon. Private misgivings about these governments were widespread but hidden for many decades, and once expressed, might have led to the governments‘ quick downfall. In the United States, defunct policies such as Prohibition and racial segregation outlasted their popular support for similar reasons. It has in fact been argued that private opinion polling spelled the end of Prohibition.

Liberal leaps occur when the establishment of pluralistic ignorance allows rapid change. Thus, Tocqueville documented how French revolutionaries managed to strip religion out of daily life with apparent support of the majority—although religious practices were in fact maintained privately and resurfaced quickly once this illusion was dispelled. Revolutionary groups wisely seize first the means of mass communication, which lets the revolutionaries create an illusion of wide support and inhibits reaction by the general population.

Roots of Pluralistic Ignorance

The basic cause of pluralistic ignorance is public misrepresentation of private attitudes. This misrepresentation takes two forms—what gets said, and what does not. On one hand, attitudes believed to be popular are overrepresented. Individuals are more likely to express attitudes believed to be normative, even if it means twisting their real preferences to fit in. Individuals who (earnestly or not) embody this perceived norm receive increased attention and are licensed to advertise their position more freely. Thus, students may boast about their drinking exploits if they believe them to be normative, and the antics of colorful drunkards are discussed with appreciative gusto.

On the other hand, public misrepresentation also involves the silencing of opinions believed to be rare, even if they are really dominant. For example, if some students think binge drinking is stupid, they may not express this opinion at the breakfast table if they think (erroneously) that they are alone in thinking so. One person’s silence contributes to the next person’s, and a spiral of silence ensues.

Pluralistic ignorance rests on a basic social-psychological principle: We believe that the behavior of others reflects who they are and underestimate the role of situations in bringing about their behavior, even when we realize that the same situations affect us. Behavior is seen as a more accurate reflection of character for others than for the self: During a water shortage when showering was forbidden, individuals who bathed thought that other bathers cared less about the community than they did, but nonbathers thought that other nonbathers cared more about the community than they did. This fundamental attribution error contributes to pluralistic ignorance because individuals take the behavior of others at face value and disregard the frequent dissembling and complications of social life.

The choices of others are believed to reflect their preferences. In fact, when seeing others choose between two options, individuals see this choice as reflecting liking for the chosen option more than disliking for the rejected option. This again contributes to pluralistic ignorance. Individuals know that they themselves are choosing the lesser of two evils (e.g., in an election between two unpopular
candidates) but interpret their peers' choice as reflecting true enthusiasm for the option that receives the most support.

Consequences of Pluralistic Ignorance

The typical consequences of pluralistic ignorance are that unpopular or immoral norms live on, suboptimal decisions are made, and a group's subjective utility is not maximized. Individuals put up with things they should not have to, unnecessarily censor themselves, and conform to norms that very few endorse. One of the deepest theoretical questions raised by pluralistic ignorance is: What should count as the true norm—the perceived consensus that affects public behaviors or the aggregated private attitudes? What counts as the real standards of a community, for example, was questioned in an obscenity trial brought against a Utah video store in 2000, when the defense showed that the number of signatures on a public petition against the store's rental of adult videos was dwarfed by the number of individuals from the same aggrieved community who privately rented or purchased the offensive material.

Pluralistic ignorance can lead to widespread alienation due to individuals' believing they are alone in their views while they are in reality surrounded by a blind crowd of like-minded peers. The U.S. popularity of the Kinsey reports on sex, originally published in 1948 and 1953, can in part be explained by their data-heavy appendixes, revealing as statistically normal some behaviors believed theretofore to be rare and shameful oddities. Ideological isolation can also be felt in polarized debates (e.g., on abortion), in which members of both sides overestimate the extremity of both their opponents' and their peers' opinions (false polarization), often feeling like "lone moderates" who are uniquely able to see the complexity and nuances of the issues involved.

On a more positive note, by creating the illusion that new ideas are embraced by all, progressive activists, inspired artists, or visionary leaders can use pluralistic ignorance to bring about much-needed change in a society initially unsure about the proposed path.

See also Attribution Biases; Bystander Effect; Conformity; Fads and Fashions; Group Polarization; Groupthink; Informational Influence; Normative Influence; Norms; Reference Groups

Further Readings


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