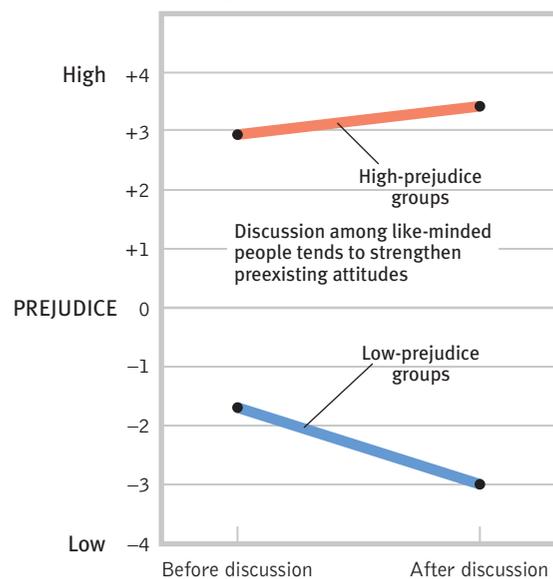


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▼ TABLE 13.2
Behavior in the Presence of Others: Three Phenomena

Phenomenon	Social context	Psychological effect of others' presence	Behavioral effect
<i>Social facilitation</i>	Individual being observed	Increased arousal	Amplified dominant behavior, such as doing better what one does well (or doing worse what is difficult)
<i>Social loafing</i>	Group projects	Diminished feelings of responsibility when not individually accountable	Decreased effort
<i>Deindividuation</i>	Group setting that fosters arousal and anonymity	Reduced self-awareness	Lowered self-restraint

▼ FIGURE 13.5
Group polarization If a group is like-minded, discussion strengthens its prevailing opinions. Talking over racial issues increased prejudice in a high-prejudice group of high school students and decreased it in a low-prejudice group. (Data from Myers & Bishop, 1970.)



“What explains the rise of fascism in the 1930s? The emergence of student radicalism in the 1960s? The growth of Islamic terrorism in the 1990s? . . . The unifying theme is simple: *When people find themselves in groups of like-minded types, they are especially likely to move to extremes. [This] is the phenomenon of group polarization.*”

Cass Sunstein, *Going to Extremes*, 2009

We have examined the conditions under which the *presence* of others can motivate people to exert themselves or tempt them to free ride on the efforts of others, make easy tasks easier and difficult tasks harder, and enhance humor or fuel mob violence. Research also shows that *interacting* with others can similarly have both bad and good effects.

Group Polarization

13-6 What are *group polarization* and *groupthink*, and how much power do we have as individuals?

Over time, initial differences between groups of college students tend to grow. If the first-year students at College X tend to be artistic, and those at College Y tend to be business-savvy, those differences will probably be even greater by the time they graduate. Similarly, gender differences tend to widen over time, as Eleanor Maccoby (2002) noted from her decades of observing gender development. Girls talk more intimately than boys do and play and fantasize less aggressively; these differences will be amplified as boys and girls interact mostly with their own gender.

In each case, the beliefs and attitudes we bring to a group grow stronger as we discuss them with like-minded others. This process, called **group polarization**, can have beneficial results, as when it amplifies a sought-after spiritual awareness or reinforces the resolve of those in a self-help group. But it can also have dire consequences. George Bishop and I [DM] discovered that when high-prejudice students discussed racial issues, they became *more* prejudiced (FIGURE 13.5). Low-prejudice students, alternatively, became even more accepting.

Group polarization can feed extremism and even suicide terrorism. Analyses of terrorist organizations around the world reveal that the terrorist mentality does not erupt suddenly, on a whim (McCauley, 2002; McCauley & Segal, 1987; Merari, 2002). It usually begins slowly, among people who share a grievance. As they interact in isolation (sometimes with other “brothers” and “sisters” in camps) their views grow more and more extreme. Increasingly, they categorize the world as “us” against “them” (Moghaddam, 2005; Qirko, 2004). Given that the self-segregation of the like-minded polarizes people, speculated a 2006 U.S. National Intelligence estimate: “We assess that the operational threat from self-radicalized cells will grow.”

When I got my start in social psychology with experiments on group polarization, I never imagined the potential dangers, or the creative possibilities, of polarization in *virtual* groups. Electronic communication and social networking have created virtual town halls where people can isolate themselves from those with different perspectives. By attuning our bookmarks and social media feeds to sites that trash the views

we despise, we can retreat into partisan tribes and revel in foregone conclusions. People read blogs that reinforce their views, and those blogs link to kindred blogs (FIGURE 13.6). Over time, the resulting political polarization—“loathing across party lines,” say some political scientists (Iyengar & Westwood, 2014)—has become much more intense than racial polarization.

As the Internet connects the like-minded and pools their ideas, climate-change skeptics, UFO abductees, and conspiracy theorists find support for their shared ideas and suspicions. White supremacists may become more racist. And militia members may become more terror prone. The longer participants spend in closed “Dark Web” forums, the more violent their messages become (Chen, 2012). Boston Marathon bombers Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev reportedly were “self-radicalized” through their Internet participation (Wilson et al., 2013). In the echo chambers of virtual worlds, as in the real world, separation + conversation = polarization.

But the Internet-as-social-amplifier can also work for good. Social networking sites connect friends and family members sharing common interests or coping with similar challenges. Peacemakers, cancer survivors, and bereaved parents can find strength and solace from kindred spirits. By amplifying shared concerns and ideas, Internet-enhanced communication can also foster social ventures. (I [DM] know this personally from social networking with others with hearing loss in an effort to transform American listening technology.)

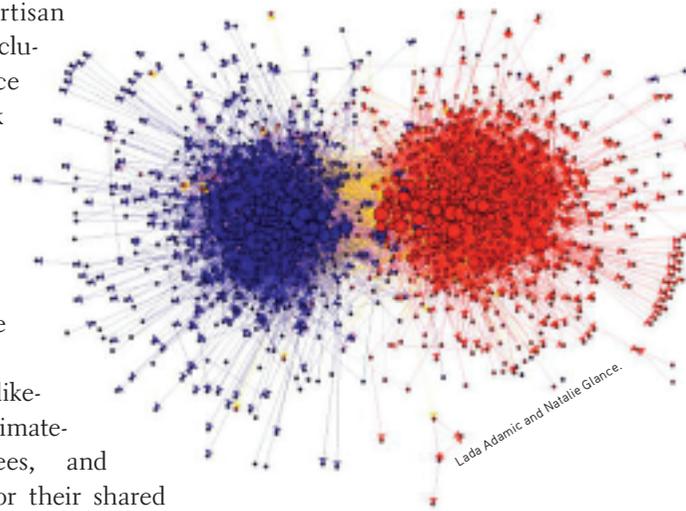
The point to remember: By connecting and magnifying the inclinations of like-minded people, the Internet can be very, very bad, but also very, very good.

Groupthink

So, group interaction can influence our personal decisions. Does it ever distort important national decisions? Consider the “Bay of Pigs fiasco.” In 1961, President John F. Kennedy and his advisers decided to invade Cuba with 1400 CIA-trained Cuban exiles. When the invaders were easily captured and soon linked to the U.S. government, Kennedy wondered in hindsight, “How could we have been so stupid?”

Social psychologist Irving Janis (1982) studied the decision-making procedures leading to the ill-fated invasion. He discovered that the soaring morale of the recently elected president and his advisers fostered undue confidence. To preserve the good feeling, group members suppressed or self-censored their dissenting views, especially after President Kennedy voiced his enthusiasm for the scheme. Since no one spoke strongly against the idea, everyone assumed the support was unanimous. To describe this harmonious but unrealistic group thinking, Janis coined the term **groupthink**.

Later studies showed that groupthink—fed by overconfidence, conformity, self-justification, and group polarization—contributed to other fiascos as well. Among them were the failure to anticipate the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor; the escalation of the Vietnam war; the U.S. Watergate cover-up; the Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident (Reason, 1987); the U.S. space shuttle *Challenger* explosion (Esser & Lindofer, 1989); and the Iraq war, launched on the false idea that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee, 2004).



▼ **FIGURE 13.6**
Like minds network in the blogosphere Blue liberal blogs link mostly to one another, as do red conservative blogs. (The intervening colors display links across the liberal-conservative boundary.) Each dot represents a blog, and each dot's size reflects the number of other blogs linking to that blog. (From Lazer et al., 2009.)



Frank Corbary/The New Yorker Collection/Conde Nast

“I wonder if we might benefit from socializing more with those who don't harbor anti-government views.”

“One of the dangers in the White House, based on my reading of history, is that you get wrapped up in groupthink and everybody agrees with everything, and there's no discussion and there are no dissenting views.”

Barack Obama, December 1, 2008, press conference

group polarization the enhancement of a group's prevailing inclinations through discussion within the group.

groupthink the mode of thinking that occurs when the desire for harmony in a decision-making group overrides a realistic appraisal of alternatives.

“Truth springs from argument among friends.”

Philosopher David Hume, 1711–1776

“If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange apples then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas.”

Attributed to dramatist
George Bernard Shaw, 1856–1950

Despite the dangers of groupthink, two heads are often better than one. Knowing this, Janis also studied instances in which U.S. presidents and their advisers collectively made good decisions, such as when the Truman administration formulated the Marshall Plan, which offered assistance to Europe after World War II, and when the Kennedy administration successfully prevented the Soviets from installing missiles in Cuba. In such instances—and in the business world, too, Janis believed—groupthink is prevented when a leader welcomes various opinions, invites experts’ critiques of developing plans, and assigns people to identify possible problems. Just as the suppression of dissent bends a group toward bad decisions, open debate often shapes good ones. This is especially the case with diverse groups, whose varied perspectives often enable creative or superior outcomes (Nemeth & Ormiston, 2007; Page, 2007). None of us is as smart as all of us.

The Power of Individuals

In affirming the power of social influence, we must not overlook the power of individuals. *Social control* (the power of the situation) and *personal control* (the power of the individual) interact. People aren’t billiard balls. When feeling coerced, we may react by doing the opposite of what is expected, thereby reasserting our sense of freedom (Brehm & Brehm, 1981).

Committed individuals can sway the majority and make social history. Were this not so, communism would have remained an obscure theory, Christianity would be a small Middle Eastern sect, and Rosa Parks’ refusal to sit at the back of the bus would not have ignited the U.S. civil rights movement. Technological history, too, is often made by innovative minorities who overcome the majority’s resistance to change. To many, the railroad was a nonsensical idea; some farmers even feared that train noise would prevent hens from laying eggs. People derided Robert Fulton’s steamboat as “Fulton’s Folly.” As Fulton later said, “Never did a single encouraging remark, a bright hope, a warm wish, cross my path.” Much the same reaction greeted the printing press, the telegraph, the incandescent lamp, and the typewriter (Cantril & Bumstead, 1960).

The power of one or two individuals to sway majorities is *minority influence* (Moscovici, 1985). In studies of groups in which one or two individuals consistently express a controversial attitude or an unusual perceptual judgment, one finding repeatedly stands out: When you are the minority, you are far more likely to sway the majority if you hold firmly to your position and don’t waffle. This tactic won’t make you popular,

but it may make you influential, especially if your self-confidence stimulates others to consider *why* you react as you do. Even when a minority’s influence is not yet visible, people may privately develop sympathy for the minority position and rethink their views (Wood et al., 1994).

The bottom line: The powers of social influence are enormous, but so are the powers of the committed individual. For classical music, Mozart mattered. For drama, Shakespeare mattered. For world history, Hitler and Mao—and Gandhi and Mandela—mattered. Social forces matter. But individuals matter, too.

Gandhi As the life of Hindu nationalist and spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi powerfully testifies, a consistent and persistent minority voice can sometimes sway the majority. Gandhi’s nonviolent appeals and fasts were instrumental in winning India’s independence from Britain in 1947.

