10.5: Influences on Voluntary Decision-Making

Voluntary decision-making means that the decision-maker is an active participant in the process of making a decision. Yet, even when making a voluntary decision, a person can be influenced by: credible sources, authority figures, one’s peers, Groupthink and the interpersonal needs for affection, inclusion and control.

Credible sources are people we trust and look to for help, guidance, or direction in making a decision. They may have no special knowledge or insight, but we tend to believe what they have to say. This may include good friends, members of our family, or other trustworthy people. When companies want to market a product, they use a spokesman they believe an audience will trust. The more we trust a person the more credibility he or she is said to possess. The more credibility, or ethos, people have, the more likely we are to trust them and let them influence the decisions we make.

Authority figures are those individuals or institutions we accept as being knowledgeable on the topic we are examining. When confronted with the need to make a critical decision or argument, we often turn to those people we consider to be authority figures for help. Social psychologist Stanley Milgram of Yale University has performed a series of experiments, which demonstrates the degree of control people we consider authorities have over us. He was curious as to how far a person would go to conform to the wishes of a person he or she did not want to disappoint. In Milgram’s classic experiment, a person is told by a person who appears to be an authority, to apply an ever-increasing electrical shock to a second person, who is in on the experiment, when that person fails to give a correct answer. Although he is not really connected to the electrical current, whenever the button is pressed, the second person screams as if he is being electrocuted. The shocks appear to be causing more and more pain and you have to make a decision to continue administering the shocks, or discontinue them.

How far would you go? If you are the average person Milgram encountered, you might continue applying what you thought was an electrical shock until you “killed” the other person.
Milgram wrote,

“I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes, he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse and yet he obeyed to the end.” ²

“It may be that we are puppets – puppets controlled by the strings of society. But at least we are puppets with perception, with awareness. And perhaps our awareness is the first step to our liberation.” --Stanley Milgram ³

After 10 years of continuous research Milgram concluded in his book, Obedience to Authority, that, in general, most people are highly susceptible to the influence of authority figures. When working with those they consider an authority figure, people tend to make decisions based on what they think that authority figure would want them to do.

**Peer influence** exists when a person is motivated to make a decision based primarily on the influence of those he or she wants to be identified with and be accepted by. Peer influence occurs when an individual voluntarily seeks the support or approval or goodwill of others as the basis for making a decision.

There is an entire range of influence we get from others, ranging from intense peer influence to total independence from others’ influence. As the scale of peer influence on a person increases, he/she becomes increasingly dependent on others and less likely to make his or her own decisions.

Peer pressure can be very influential. Research has discovered, to no one’s surprise, that the initial decision for using drugs, having sex for the first time, smoking, and even shoplifting, is made as a result of peer pressure. When we decide that the only acceptable decision is the one that conforms to our peers’ point of view, we severely limit our alternatives. The strength of peer influence rests with the desire to conform to others. Experts on peer influence say that from age twelve on, a person is likely to consider how their peers will view them, based on the decision they are about to make.

In his famous conformity experiments, Solomon Asch set out to determine what happens when people are asked to estimate something that is visually very clear.
Dr. Asch showed a group of ten people a line, and then asked them which of another group of lines was of the same length. The subjects did not know that the other nine members of the group were in on the experiment, and had been instructed to give the wrong answer. At a point in time, all nine would consistently agree that an unequal line was the correct answer. The subjects were faced with a conflict between what their senses were telling them and what they heard from a majority of those they believed were their fellow group members.

Dr. Asch found that a significant percentage, 75%, of the subjects agreed with the group instead of trusting their own judgment at least one time and conformed to the group nearly one-third of the time. He concluded that peer groups influence people even if the people in the groups are strangers.\(^4\)

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**Reference**